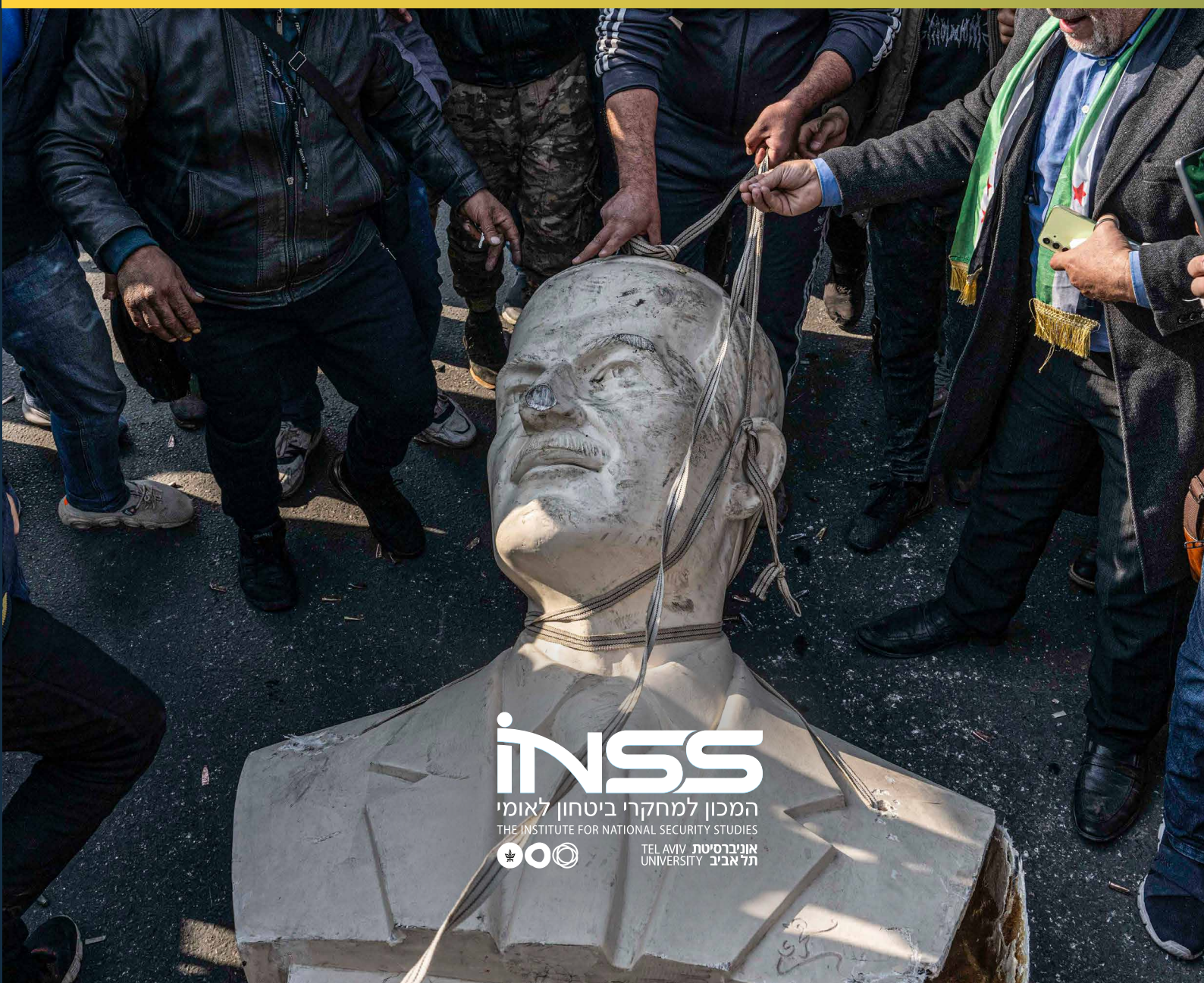




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Israel's Post-October 7 Wars and the International Order

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This article analyzes some of the relationships between the struggle over the international order and the regional rivalries in the Middle East. Israel's wars in the Middle East since October 7 have manifested two processes of the "unification of fronts." One is global and the other is regional. On the global level, the Ukraine War, the Taiwan crisis and the Gaza War are all part of the escalating great power competition between the US and its allies versus the revisionist axis of Russia-North Korea-Iran-China. This axis aims to undermine US hegemony and the US-led liberal international order. The substantial US assistance to Israel since October 7 should be viewed in this context of the global conflict between the US-led West and the anti-US revisionist axis, even if Western criticism of Israel's conduct in Gaza increased gradually over time. On the regional level, the unification of fronts is expressed by the onset of a number of violent conflicts immediately following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. These conflicts are part of the Iranian-led "resistance front" strategy to challenge American dominance in the Middle East and to weaken its key partner—Israel. In this context, a major—even if not the only—objective of the Hamas attack on October 7 was to disrupt the US-led normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Iranian-led Axis of Resistance has taken advantage of a number of failed states in the Middle East. Finally, with regard to the populist challenge to the liberal order, President Trump introduces an approach which might be called an "illiberal peace," namely avoiding and ending wars without necessarily promoting liberal values such as human rights and national self-determination.

Key Words: the post-October 7 wars; Israel; USA; the International Liberal Order; Illiberal Peace; the West; Iran; Saudi Arabia; Hamas; the Revisionist Axis; China; Russia; failed states; global; regional; populism

The sudden collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 is a major blow to the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance, and is at least partly a result of the devastating blows inflicted by the IDF on the key members of the Axis: Hezbollah,

especially in the fall months (September-October) of 2024 and on Iran in the October 26, 2024 Israeli air attack. The regime change in Syria is also a major defeat for Russian influence in the Middle East as Syria was for

decades the key client of Moscow in the region, especially under the Assad dynasty (1971–2024), hosting a crucial Russian naval base. Despite the strategic importance of its military bases in Syria for the great-power aspirations of Russia, its ability to come to the aid of its Syrian client was severely constrained by its war on Ukraine. Thus, Moscow's ability to help its client in 2024 was much more limited than in 2015, when Russia's devastating bombing campaign saved the Assad regime from collapse during the revolt of the Arab Spring. Back then Russia was not engaged in a major war such as the Ukraine war, which currently limits its ability to intervene militarily in the Middle East. Saving the Assad regime a decade ago—together with Iran and Hezbollah—was useful for the great-power aspirations of Russia as well as for the consolidation of the pro-Iranian Axis, which fought Israel in the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack on the Western Negev.

Zelensky also said he was recommending that allies support the Israeli people

Such developments demonstrate the strong links between the global and the regional levels. On the whole, following the October 7 attack the US-led West stood with Israel, even if over time there has been growing criticism of Israel in the West with regard to humanitarian and political issues. At the same time, the anti-West Axis of China-Russia-Iran-North Korea stood—though in different ways and to varying degrees—with Israel's opponents. This paper analyzes some of the relationships between the struggle over the international order and the regional rivalries in the Middle East.

Another example of such relationships took place a few months earlier—on April 14, 2024. On that day an Iranian missile and drone attack on Israel was unprecedented in several aspects. First, its scope was massive. In addition, it was the first time that Iran attacked Israel directly from its territory (Vinograd, 2024). Finally, it

was the first time that an attack on Israel was defended by a Western-Arab coalition (Melman, 2024). This dramatic event sharpened the main attribute of the wars taking place in the post-October 7 era in the Middle East: “The Unity of Fronts” on two levels—global and regional.

On the global level, the current wars in the Middle East, similarly to the war in Ukraine and the threat posed by China to Taiwan, manifest the struggle between the US-led democratic camp and the anti-American revisionist camp led by Russia and China. This revisionist camp aims to weaken the liberal international order. Thus, shortly after October 7, during a national address, U.S. President Joe Biden drew a connection between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Israeli actions in Gaza, stating, “We are at an inflection point in history.” (Kempe, 2023). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also condemned Hamas, likening the group's tactics to those of Russia, saying during a visit to NATO's headquarters in Brussels that they “seek to hold free and democratic nations as hostages, and they want power over those who seek freedom” (Lamothe, Rauhala & O'Grady, 2023). Zelensky also said he was recommending that allies support the Israeli people (Rosenzweig-Ziff, 2023). As a global columnist of the Washington Post argued shortly after the October 7 attack: “The U.S. game plan for both Ukraine and Israel is essentially the same. It should support the partner countries that are the victims of aggression, give them the weapons they need to fight and build a diplomatic coalition around them.” (Rogin, 2023). A few months later, shortly after the Iranian attack and following quite a few months of delay, the House of Representatives approved a huge aid package of \$95 billion to the three threatened states (Cowan, Warburton & Zengerle, 2024).

On the regional level, the unification of fronts was derived from the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance”.¹ Iran took advantage of the expansion of the failed states phenomenon in the Middle East such as Iraq, Lebanon,

Yemen and Syria, in order to consolidate this axis. Under its encouragement armed militias took over parts of these states and they have been used by Iran to advance its regional objectives, including the struggle against Israel and the US. The failed states have also affected the rise of nationalist-populism in the West by “exporting” terrorism and migrants to the West. Populist entrepreneurs took advantage of such exports by claiming that only “strong leaders”—like themselves—can cope effectively with such challenges.

It is impossible to disconnect the linkages between the regional and the global contexts. Therefore, in order to understand the challenges—and potentially also the opportunities—confronted by Israel since October 7, we have to examine the key threats to the international liberal order in the last decade, including the aggressive steps by China and Russia, the expanding phenomenon of failed states, and the rising polarization of western societies, notably the US, which is closely related to the rise of nationalist-populism.

The Liberal International Order

In the aftermath of WWII, the US led the establishment of a liberal order, centered especially in the West, which included North America, Western Europe and also Japan. This order focused on democracy-promotion, free trade and building international institutions and multilateral arrangements. Yet, on the international systemic level—during the bipolar Cold War—the US focused on the Soviet power and threat. Thus, the US usually followed a realist strategy of balance of power—containing and balancing the Soviet Union and its clients, by forward deployment, high defense spending and establishing security alliances. The most notable of these alliances are with its liberal allies in Europe (NATO), the bilateral alliance with Japan but also with illiberal states in East Asia and the Middle East. On the basis of its Cold War considerations, the US even helped to topple democratically-elected governments

in Iran and Latin America (Miller with Ziv Rubinovitz, 2020)

When the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US transformed its strategy as it became the global hegemon under unipolarity. The US has tried to expand the liberal order much beyond the West and democracy and free markets have flourished worldwide. The global changes made it possible for Washington to address much more seriously the domestic nature of its former two key rivals—China and Russia—aiming at the integration of the two powers into the liberal international order. Thus, the focus of US policy toward the two former rivals shifted from solely the issues of the balance of power (armament and alliances) and arms control to issues related to domestic politics and economic policies: democratization, globalization and economic engagement (Mandelbaum, 1997). In other words, the US aimed at liberal transformation—or convergence—of the key powers. Such a shift, and particularly the focus on the domestic nature of Russia and China, could be quite beneficial to the US view of the world order—liberal, capitalist, globalized and democratic. The US viewed such world order as not only profitable economically (enhancing free trade), but also beneficial for its national security (specifically the argument that democracies do not go to war against other democracies and also that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflicts).² Even if the balance of power changes some time in the future, according to the liberal belief, these liberalized states should not pose a security threat to the US.

However, these expectations have not materialized. Not only have China and Russia not become democracies, but each one of them has initiated offensive steps against its neighbors. Russia, which annexed Crimea already in 2014, escalated its offensive and invaded Ukraine in 2022. China threatens Taiwan and has taken over large parts of the South China Sea, which has huge strategic and economic importance. Russia

and China also cooperate with two other anti-Western authoritarian countries—Iran and North Korea. One key expression is the massive arms supply by the latter two to Russia during its war with Ukraine (Rathbone et al., 2024). While there is no formal alliance, there is coordination and shared interests against the common enemy: the US-led liberal order.

The Threat Posed by the Failed States

The second threat to the liberal order refers to the expanding phenomenon in the last two decades, especially in the Greater Middle East, notably after the failed post-9/11 US military interventions (Iraq, Afghanistan) and the “Arab Spring” uprisings (Syria, Yemen and Libya): more and more states have become failed states. A failed state is characterized by a malfunctioning of state institutions in many fields, but primarily in the absence of a monopoly over the means of violence in the sovereign territory of the failed state.³ Such a failure invites the rise of armed actors in the territory of the failed state. Not only are such actors not subordinated to the state authorities, but frequently they are loyal to foreign entities; thus, they might enable foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of the failed state. States lacking a common national identity provide fertile ground for the rise of such actors, which, in turn, might have trans-border links with neighboring states that share a similar sectarian identity.

Let’s take the case of Iraq as an example of a failed state, a neighbor’s penetration and the establishment of armed militias loyal to this neighbor: In 2003, in the aftermath of 9/11 the US invaded Iraq. Iraq is deeply divided among a Shiite majority, and large Sunni and Kurdish minorities. The Shiite majority traditionally suffered from discrimination by the Sunni minority, which ruled the country for many years. The American intervention brought about the breakdown of the Iraqi state, which became a failed state (Petersen, 2024). Following a process of US-led democratization, the Shiite majority became dominant. This was resisted

by the Sunnis, leading to a Sunni-Shiite civil war. Such developments produced two benefits for Iran: 1. The weakness of Iraq led to a change in the balance of power in the Gulf in favor of Iran. 2. Iran could take advantage of the trans-border identity ties between its own dominant Shiite majority and the newly dominant Shiite majority in Iraq. Thus, Iran could penetrate Iraqi domestic politics and use the civil war and later the rise of the Islamic State to establish armed militias composed of Iraqi citizens but loyal to Iran rather than to the Iraqi government.

The question is in what sense have these changes produced a rising challenge to the liberal order? Failed states are prone to civil wars, foreign interventions and the rise of terrorist organizations. As a result, these states tend to export migrants and terrorists. While there are other sources of migration to the West, the large wave of migrants from the failed states in the Middle East have an especially high salience, particularly following the 2003 US failed intervention in Iraq and the chaos of the Arab Spring. This is because the Iraq intervention and the Arab Spring generated a lot of attention in the West, as did the wave of migrants in their aftermath, including, for example, the decision of the German Chancellor at the time—Angela Merkel—to admit to Germany around a million or so refugees, mostly from some of the failed states of the Middle East. Such exports, in turn, provide some of the key factors for the emergence of the third challenge to the liberal order: the rise of illiberal nationalist populism in many Western countries, which serve as the core of the liberal order, most notably the US following the rise of Trump. The rise of populism also increases polarization in American society and thus potentially weakens its ability to lead the liberal order.

Iran’s Rapprochement with China and Russia: The Anti-American Axis in the Middle East

Even if Hamas’ attack on the Western Negev was not coordinated with the members of the

anti-American camp, and even if its precise timing was hidden from Iran, a key supporter of Hamas, there is no doubt that this camp gained a lot initially from the attack—until the recent major setbacks in Lebanon, Syria and Iran itself, especially since September 2024 and until the removal of Assad in December 2024. The initial gains of the Axis included, for example, the diversion of global attention from the aggressive moves of Russia and China in Ukraine and Taiwan. Similarly, the focus was removed, at least for a while, from the nuclear plans of North Korea and Iran.

Another great benefit of post-October 7 conflict for the revisionist camp refers to the suspension (at least until now) of Saudi-Israeli normalization, which seemed very close to materialization on the eve of the Gaza War. Normalization was designed to consolidate the Saudi position in the pro-American camp against the efforts of China, Russia and Iran to accomplish rapprochement with the Saudis (Anderson, Salem & Hansler, 2024). Somewhat similarly to the US-Soviet competition over the international alignment of Egypt in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia became the “great prize” in the struggle between the Western camp and the anti-American bloc. Beyond its vast oil resources, additional reasons for the centrality of Saudi Arabia include the economic modernization taking place in the country under its de-facto leader—Mohammad Ben-Salman. Saudi Arabia is also the home of the two holiest places in Islam. While the outcomes of the Arab Spring undermined stability in quite a few Arab states, Saudi Arabia manifests political stability, which, in turn, strengthens its leadership in the Middle East.

More generally, this struggle over Saudi Arabia is part of the global struggle between the camps on the affiliation of the “Global South.” This is a very large group, which is not aligned formally with any one of the competing global camps.⁴ Moreover, the “Global South” is a rather amorphous group, though the oil-rich Persian Gulf countries are among the most significant

members. Their financial resources, domestic stability and economic modernization, make them attractive for investments and trade, and thus their political power is also rising.

Similarly to the US-Soviet competition over the international alignment of Egypt in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia became the “great prize” in the struggle between the Western camp and the anti-American bloc.

Indeed the Middle East is becoming a central arena in the intensifying struggle over the “Global South.” At the beginning of 2023 it looked as though the anti-American camp was accumulating a number of achievements in the Middle East. The first one of them was the transformation of Iran into a major arms supplier to Russia as the latter became entangled in its war with Ukraine (Smagin, 2024). Such a rapprochement contradicted Israeli expectations that these two key supporters of the Assad regime would start to compete with each other over who would be the dominant force in Syria after they joined forces to save Assad during the Arab Spring. The recent collapse of the Assad regime might challenge the future of Russian-Iranian ties, but until this collapse it seemed that their relations were quite robust. The Russian-Iranian rapprochement joined the rising cooperation between China and Iran, which started in the economic domain and extended into the strategic area: diplomatic relations between the two countries were upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2016 and to a 25-year cooperation agreement in 2021 (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2023).

In 2023 China produced an additional achievement, at least a symbolic one, for the anti-American camp in the Middle East by brokering the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two traditional Islamist rivals in the Middle East: Iran—the leader of the Shiite camp and Saudi Arabia—the leader of the Sunni group. The implications for the US and for Israel

were potentially quite severe: the US might lose the great-power competition to its key rival—China—, which could replace the US as a key “honest broker”—a role which the US traditionally played in the Middle East (Pierson, 2023). China also recently hosted reconciliation talks between the two rival Palestinian groups, Fatah and Hamas, which may further enhance Chinese influence in the area, at least in the soft power domain as an actor which works to reconcile rivals, supposedly in contrast to the US which stands firmly behind one party—Israel, including arming it, and hasn’t thus far succeeded in advancing diplomatic solutions of reconciliation among adversaries. Even if the US remains the key broker in the region, these moves can be seen as accomplishments, though relatively modest ones, of a newcomer to Middle East diplomacy.

From the Israeli perspective, the apparent rapprochement between its major rival and the Saudis was potentially quite worrisome and could have established a new united Muslim front against Israel, or at least diminish the prospects of Saudi-Israeli normalization—the major goal of the Israeli diplomacy in the region.⁵

The American response to the accomplishments of its rivals in 2023 was a major acceleration of the earlier idea of Israeli-Saudi normalization. This normalization could draw on the experience of the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco. However, because of the centrality of Saudi Arabia in the Arab and Muslim worlds, only Saudi-Israeli normalization could signal the full integration of Israel into the Middle East and the Muslim world as a whole and cement the formation of a bloc of pragmatic, status-quo, economically modernizing countries, composed of the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Israel. Such a bloc could potentially balance the revisionist Axis of Resistance led by Iran and composed of its armed proxies in four failed Arab states: Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Following the recent blow to the Axis in Lebanon, Syria

and Iran, the regional balance of power has changed. The status-quo/modernizing bloc could become the leading force in the region, potentially also affecting the stabilization of some of the failed states such as Syria and Lebanon even though this is an extremely demanding task and its prospects of success are quite uncertain. However, the Muslim Brotherhood camp, which includes Turkey, Qatar and many of the victorious rebels in the Syria, is also rising in the aftermath of the defeat of the Baath regime in Syria. After all, Turkey was the sponsor and the protector of many of the rebels. Accordingly, their victory also enhances Turkey’s regional standing at the expense of the Iranian camp and of Russia.

Approaching the Saudis

The plan for Israeli-Saudi normalization took place—well before the recent upheaval in Syria—in a broad context of strengthening security relations between the US and Saudi Arabia in order to entrench the latter in the pro-American camp. This would have constituted a major accomplishment for the status-quo/pro-Western camp in the Middle East against the anti-US revisionist “Axis of Resistance” led by Iran.

The currently much weaker “Axis of Resistance” is composed of armed militias which are trained, armed and funded by Iran. The members of the axis have been resorting to violence against Israel, especially since the October 7 Hamas attack, and occasionally direct the violence also against the American military presence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. The supreme objective of the axis is to turn Iran and its proxies into the dominant actor in the Middle East in the spirit of the Islamic Revolution of the late 1970s. The axis draws upon the common Shia identity of its members, even if from different variants of the Shiite sect and has thus mostly included Shiite groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. An additional source of the anti-Western axis is based on “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Uniting under their rejection of the state of Israel, Sunni

radicals, notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad, have joined the mostly Shiite axis.

The Saudi-American agreement was supposed to include American security guarantees, perhaps a security alliance with the Saudis and also advanced arms supply and assistance in the construction of a civilian nuclear reactor. The US was willing to offer far-reaching benefits to the Saudis so that they would continue to be part of the American-led group rather than join the Chinese-Russian camp and so that the Saudis would also normalize their relations with Israel. The Saudi condition was that Israel would make concessions on the Palestinian issue (England, 2024); but Ben-Salman, the de-facto leader of Saudi Arabia, seemed to be satisfied before October 7 with only limited concessions. These expected concessions were so limited that even the far-right Israeli government might have accepted them at that stage.

The Hamas attack on October 7 undermined all of that. Even though there were a number of reasons why Hamas committed such an attack (freeing Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, the Jerusalem issue, notably the control of Haram El-Sharif/Temple Mount, the hardline policies of the far-right Israeli government in the West Bank), the timing of this barbaric attack was at least partly intended to prevent Saudi-Israeli normalization. Its goal was to derail the potential great Israeli accomplishment in achieving legitimacy in the eyes of the leading Arab and Muslim state, and thus, guaranteeing Israeli integration into the Middle East and the reinforcement of American status in the region. In other words, the Hamas attack served, in fact, the key objective of the global anti-American camp: to weaken American hegemony.

Minutes of Hamas' secret meetings, seized by the Israeli military and obtained by the New York Times, provide a detailed record of the planning for the October 7 attack. This record shows that the decision to attack was also influenced by Hamas' desire to disrupt efforts

to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia (Bergman, Rasgon & Kingsley, 2024).

In early January 2025 Israel is increasingly concerned that the Kremlin will provide Iran with the technology to turn its enriched uranium into a nuclear warhead.

The Anti-Israeli Policies of China and Russia

Following the Gaza War, the global division into two camps—the US-led liberal-democrat vs. the authoritarian anti-American—shaped considerably the positions of different states in relation to Israel and its war in Gaza. The anti-American group, including China and Russia, expressed critical positions toward Israel and its assault on Gaza, while avoiding criticism of Hamas, including not calling it a “terrorist organization.” (Myers & Frenkel, 2023). Criticism of Israel was also expressed in the deliberations of the UN Security Council and the various votes taking place there in relation to the war. The camp members also conducted a large-scale anti-Israel campaign on social media with occasional antisemitic expressions (Benjakob, 2024). Russia especially followed a pro-Hamas policy by hosting Hamas delegations shortly after the October 7 massacre. Moreover, following the mid-April 2024 escalation between Israel and Iran, it looked like Russia was planning to accelerate the supply of the advanced Sukhoi-35 jets to Iran and maybe also the advanced S-400 air-defense systems (the supply of the SU-35 has not yet materialized) (Warrick, 2024). Moreover, in early January 2025 Israel is increasingly concerned that the Kremlin will provide Iran with the technology to turn its enriched uranium into a nuclear warhead. The two countries are expected to sign a strategic cooperation agreement in January, just days before Trump's inauguration (Caspi, 2025).

Russia also provided targeting data for Houthi assaults on global shipping (Faucon & Grove, 2024). The Houthis are members of the

Iranian-led Axis of Resistance and their declared aim is to assist Hamas in the war against Israel. Indeed, well after the cease-fire was agreed between Israel and Hezbollah, the Houthis continued to fire missiles at Israel and Israel responded by bombing Houthi targets in the areas of Houthi control in Yemen. In addition, the BRICS Summit of October 2024 (led by China and Russia alongside India, Brazil and South Africa), hosted by Putin, adopted anti-Israeli resolutions.

In contrast, the US-led Western camp was shocked by the brutality of Hamas and expressed support for Israel's right to defend itself, even if conditioning it more and more on humanitarian moves such as reducing civilian deaths and providing aid to the population. The leader of the Western camp stood immediately behind Israel in aspects directly related to the conduct of the war: massive supply of arms and ammunition, the deployment of two aircraft carrier groups, a nuclear submarine and a Marine combat force to the Middle East in order to deter the Iranians from intervention and Hezbollah from escalating its aggression in the north of Israel (Scharf, 2023). The US also exercised its veto at least three times to prevent anti-Israeli resolutions in the UNSC. A tacit objective of the US, however, was to compel Israel to avoid initiating another front against Hezbollah. At the same time, the US and its allies took an active part in Israel's air defense, notably against the two Iranian missile attacks in April and October 2024 and also against the Houthis' missile attacks.

There has been criticism from some Israeli and American right-wing commentators on delays in the supply of some munitions required for the Israeli war effort in Gaza.⁶ On the whole, however, American support for Israel since October 7 has been consistent and unprecedented. Continuous arms supply for over a year surpasses, both in quantity and in duration, the important airlift during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Additionally, Biden's visit to Israel at the beginning of the war and

his encouraging address to the Israeli people, still in the shock phase of the brutal Hamas attack, was quite an uncommon diplomatic move (Neuman, 2023).

How Best to Explain Biden's High Level of Support for Israel?

The American support for Israel culminated during the Iranian missile attacks on Israel on April 14 and also on October 1, 2024. The US and its allies—the UK, France and Jordan—took an active part in downing the Iranian missiles and drones. The US also exerted pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to supply Israel with intelligence about the onslaught (Winer, 2024). Thus, an active Western-Arab status-quo coalition has emerged during wartime—an unprecedented event in Arab-Israeli relations.

One explanation refers to the president's worldview: President Biden defines himself as a "Zionist." Another explanation is domestic politics: assuming that most of the American public was pro-Israel (at least at the beginning of the war, even if public support became weaker—especially among young Democrats—the longer the war lasted, with rising civilian casualties and a growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza) (Silver et al., 2024). Domestic politics also played a role because of the two-party competition in the US. Since the Republican party, and its leader Trump, presented themselves as wholeheartedly pro-Israel, Biden couldn't be too critical of Israel in order not to lose votes—even though on the other hand the Democratic party lost votes in 2024 elections among the radical left and among Arab-Muslim Americans, especially in a state like Michigan where there are a relatively high number of Muslim voters.

An alternative explanation refers to the struggle over the international order. In the eyes of the American administration, the war in Gaza joins the war in Ukraine and the Chinese threat to invade Taiwan. The three of them are "frontier wars" between two global camps struggling over the character of the international order. Within this global war, there was here,

in fact, a process of “unification of fronts.” On the Middle East front the Chinese-Russian-Iranian axis is fully invested in the weakening of Israel and of American standing in the region. Therefore, the administration had to support Israel similarly to their support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion of its territory and the deterrence of China against an invasion of Taiwan. Accordingly, the foreign aid package, approved in 2024, includes all three fronts. In sum, the two global camps don’t view the war in Gaza—and also the other post-October 7 Middle Eastern fronts—as a unique regional episode, but as part of the struggle over the global order.⁷

The administration’s globalist approach, namely viewing the various regional conflicts as part of the global struggle against the authoritarian axis, is manifested most dramatically by the continuous support for allied leaders who “failed in their roles or rejected policy suggestions and diplomatic efforts by the Americans.” (Wong, 2024). There are a number of leaders who fit this category, but the support for Prime Minister Netanyahu is especially salient in this respect because the war in Gaza “has been especially costly in terms of American and international public opinion.” (Wong, 2024). What is the explanation provided for this continuous support despite the high costs?: “US officials often justify their choices by saying they cannot alienate partners they need to counterbalance Russia, Iran, North Korea and especially China.” (Wong, 2024).

The Iranian Fire Ring

The Western-Arab assistance to Israel against the Iranian attacks can also be explained through the struggle over the international order. This event directs our attention to the second challenge to the international order: the expansion of the phenomenon of failed states in the Middle East and their exploitation by Iran. The success of this policy lasted until the recently major military accomplishments of Israel against Iran and Hezbollah in late 2024,

which also created some of the conditions (in addition to the entanglement of Russia in the Ukraine War) for the removal of the Assad regime in Syria, which had served for many years as the land bridge to transfer arms from Iran to its leading proxy—Hezbollah in Lebanon. Still, it is worth discussing the logic behind the establishment of the Iranian Axis of Resistance.

Even though most of the members of these militias are citizens of the local state, and at any rate, are not Iranian citizens, they are loyal to Iran rather than to the local governments.

Iran took advantage of two key characteristics of four failed states in the Middle East—Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen: State weakness and considerable Shiite (or Shiite-related) groups in states which hadn’t succeeded in building inclusive nations that are congruent with the boundaries of the sovereign territory of the states. Namely, in these failed states the loyalty of many citizens is first of all to their sectarian/ethnic group rather than to the nation-state as a whole (Miller, 2007).

Such a combination—of weak states and large Shiite groups—has made it possible for Iran to establish—or deploy—armed Shiite militias in the four countries. Even though most of the members of these militias are citizens of the local state, and at any rate, are not Iranian citizens, they are loyal to Iran rather than to the local governments. In this way, the “Axis of Resistance” was formed: Not as a classical inter-state alliance, but one state which enjoys the loyalty of armed militias in foreign states based on a shared identity (broadly defined) and on material assistance (funding, training and arms supply) by the leading state.

The strongest element in the axis, militarily and politically, was until recently Hezbollah in Lebanon, and alongside it also the Houthis in Yemen and the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria (until the recent removal of Assad). In addition to these Shiite groups, radical Sunni Palestinians

joined the axis, most notably, Hamas, based on the common hostility to Israel.

As a result of the deployment of the Iranian-led axis throughout the Middle East, the Gaza War expanded after October 7 well beyond Gaza to become a regional war. Iran succeeded to form around Israel—until the recent military developments—“a ring of fire,” as stated by a former Iranian military leader—Qassem Soleimani. Thus, Hezbollah initiated a war from Southern Lebanon against the North of Israel a day after the Hamas attack on Israel; the Houthis have been harming maritime transportation to Israel in the Red Sea and sent rockets and drones to southern Israel; and militias in Iraq and Syria attacked American forces in the region but also Israeli targets, for example, firing from Syria against targets in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Iran also agitated for disturbances in the Israeli-controlled West Bank (Porat, 2024).

Iran itself moved from supporting its proxies to a direct attack on Israel, for the first time ever, in the April 14 missile attack on Israel following the targeted assassination in Damascus—the capital of the failed Syrian state—of senior officers in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. This operation was attributed, according to foreign sources, to Israel; and these sources claimed that it was not the first time Israel committed such an attack. The Iranians conducted a second missile attack on Israel on October 1, 2024, firing over 180 ballistic missiles, which caused some limited damage even though the Israeli air defenses were able to shoot down most of the missiles. Western powers, led by the US and including also the UK and France, helped Israel in its air-defense. Apart for supporting Israel’s right to self-defense and their interest in preventing escalation, which would entangle them in a major Middle East war, the Western powers view Iran, especially recently, as a member of the anti-Western axis (China-Russia-N. Korea-Iran) since it became a major arms provider to Russia in its war on Ukraine. This war is clearly seen in the liberal West as a major attack on the liberal international order. Accordingly,

Iran is viewed in recent years more clearly as a partner in posing this threat to the liberal order, as stated recently in an analytical article in the New York Times: “Iran’s open cooperation with China and especially with Russia has troubled Europeans, whose security is threatened by Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.” (Erlanger, 2024).

Populism and Isolationism of “America First”?

There are strong links, as was suggested, between two leading export domains of the failed states—migration and terrorism—and the rise of nationalist populism in recent years.⁸ This rise deepened the cleavages in Western societies and created a high level of polarization. Such polarization and particularly the rise of nationalist-populism, constitute the third major challenge to the liberal international order. The populists support the weakening of “checks and balances” in liberal democracies, namely, the weakening of the judiciary, the professional bureaucracy, the mainstream media, the academy and more (the so-called “deep state” in the eyes of the populists). The populists argue that only the election outcomes reflect the true “will of the people,” while the liberal elites are globalists and cosmopolitans who care about the whole world, but do not necessarily care about their own people (Müller, 2017).

Mass migration from the failed states (mainly from the Greater Middle East) as well as the export of terrorism, reinforced popular identification with the populists in Western countries. The migration has generated a wave of resistance in Western societies, rooted in fear of a threat to the character of the dominant identity—White Christian—and the traditional cultural attributes of Europe and the US. Many of the populists believe in the so-called “replacement theory,” namely that the liberal elites encourage non-White migration because the elites believe that the migrants will support them politically (Charlton, 2019). In this way, the elites deprive the “authentic” people of their well-deserved rule of the country.

Populists also use the widespread fear of the terrorism exported by the failed states, for their political purposes. The populists claim that only “strong leaders” from their own ranks (which are not constrained by the liberal checks and balances) are able to overcome this threat as well as the migration challenge.

With regard to the Middle East, and especially Israel, the main challenge posed by the populists is the tendency towards isolationism, mainly the “America First” approach of the American president, Donald J. Trump. The Trumpist approach is, at least to some extent, a continuation of the pre-WWII American isolationism (whose slogan was also “America First”). According to this approach, the US has, first of all, to take care of its own affairs, narrowly defined, and surely to avoid foreign interventions beyond the two vast oceans which provide the US with excellent defense. The most recent American military interventions—in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya—are viewed as major failures and thus only reinforced the isolationist tendency and the populist stream which leads it. Moreover, the growing polarization in American society, at least partly as a result of the rise of populism, could weaken America’s ability to lead the liberal order and thus also result in growing American isolationism (Giurlando & Wajner, 2023).

The US is the keystone of the liberal order, and it leads this order until today. The possibility, therefore, of American isolationism can severely harm the liberal world vis-a-vis its opponents in Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. One manifestation of the potential effects of this was the great difficulty faced by the Biden administration in enacting the aid package to the three “frontier states.” The key reason for this difficulty was the objection by the Trumpist isolationists in Congress to supporting military aid to Ukraine against Russian aggression. Even when the package was approved—despite the Trumpists’ objection—part of the aid to Ukraine was converted from a grant to a loan in order to appease the isolationists (Frum, 2024).

While the Israeli portion of the package (\$14 billion) was widely supported, American isolationism—especially a military disengagement from the Middle East—is still a real possibility, particularly under a Trumpist administration, even though the inclusion in the administration of some vehemently pro-Israel and anti-Iran hawks might block the isolationist direction in relation to Israel. At any rate, the argument in favor of at least some military disengagement from the Middle East is based on three considerations: First, from a realpolitik perspective, the focus is likely to be on competition with the key global rival of the US, namely China in the Indo-Pacific; secondly, the energy-independence of the US lessens the dependence on energy sources in the Persian Gulf; and, third, public disinclination for intervention in the Middle East following the troubling experience of the twenty-first century interventions in the Greater Middle East. Another reason might be the rising opposition among progressive American youngsters to support for Israel, as manifested in the recent campus protests. This element is not likely to affect the Trump administration, which is quite hostile to the progressive cause. Still, it does show the reluctance of many young people in America to support Israel and that might have some potential influence, even in the Trump administration.

American disengagement poses a great danger to Israel’s security. The post-October 7 wars show very clearly how much Israel depends on American security assistance: for the supply of sophisticated weapon systems, large amounts of munitions, major financial assistance and diplomatically—especially its veto in the UN Security Council to block anti-Israeli resolutions. There is no substitute for US aid and support. The Europeans are neither motivated nor able to replace the US in this respect. And for any Israeli leader who believed in the ability of Israel to maneuver between the great powers, the post-October 7 wars clarify that China and Russia are hostile and closely related to the

key Israeli opponent—Iran—as all three of them share the objective of undermining American hegemony and the international liberal order it leads.

With regard to the U.S., the current aid program expires in 2028 and it is questionable whether Trump's next program will be as generous as the current \$38 billion package (distributed over a decade). Beyond the aspect of isolationism, this is related to Trump's transactional economic conception that in every deal there should be a "winner" and a "loser" in financial terms—and he doesn't like to be on what looks like the "loser" side of the deal, which provides financial assistance for free. On the other hand, many supporters of Trump, including some of the most loyal of them, notably the Evangelists, are keen supporters of Israel and that might incline Trump to show great support for Israel, including financially. It is quite clear that he'll not be troubled so much by humanitarian concerns or by Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. However, Trump is very much interested in war avoidance during his administration, and definitely those wars which generate major media attention or disrupt American campuses. This might be called an "illiberal peace," namely peace which doesn't necessarily advance human and national self-determination rights of all people, such as the Ukrainians, Taiwanese or the Palestinians. Rather it will be peace based on the power of the regionally stronger parties such as Israel—supported by the US—in the Middle East. At the same time, Trump will be interested in ending wars and avoidance of new wars while he is in the White House.

What Israel Should Do

The liberal countries of the West, led by the US, are the key source of support for Israel. The problem is that with every passing day, more and more publics in Western countries view Israel as the aggressor in the context of the Gaza War, because of the deaths of civilians and the humanitarian crisis in the Strip. Trump might

not be bothered at all by such considerations. However, a substantial public in the US and surely in Europe is influenced by such concerns and Israel should take that into account when it looks into the future of its relations with the liberal world. In order to preserve such Western support and to extend cooperation with Arab states, Israel must behave carefully by following the laws of war and the humanitarian rules, avoiding as much as possible the killing of non-combatants, steering clear of an annexation of any Palestinian territories and also of establishing any Jewish settlements in Gaza.

A key challenge for Israel is the absence of "a day after" plan for Gaza. At the end of the war, Israel should establish—in cooperation with the US and pragmatic Arab states— a civilian administration in Gaza. Such an administration should include Palestinian elements from Hamas' rival, Fatah. Such an administration should express processes of change in a reformed and improved Palestinian Authority, so that it will accumulate renewed public legitimacy following years of corruption and illegitimacy. At the same time, the parties must agree on the principle of the two-state solution, even if its materialization will take a few years.

Such a plan should aid the integration of Israel into the Middle East via normalization, peaceful relations and economic-technological cooperation with the Saudi-led pragmatic Arab states. Since Iran and its proxies also threaten many of these states (even if they became much weaker in recent months), the cooperation with Israel can extend, even if not in a formal alliance, to military domains such as air and naval defense. The "absolute victory" of Israel will be its integration into the Middle East by joining a Western-Arab coalition, which will advance economic cooperation and joint defense, but also a political solution to the Palestinian issue in the next few years.

This will help to stabilize the Middle East and reinforce the ties of the moderate coalition, which focuses on economic modernization, with the West. A more stable situation might also

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Notes

- 1 On the “Axis of Resistance,” see Leonhardt, 2024.
- 2 On the Democratic Peace principle, see Russett et al., 1993.
- 3 See definitions of “Failed States” in *The Economist*, 2021.
- 4 For more on the Global South, see *The Conversation*, 2023.
- 5 Press reports suggest that the Gaza War is producing such a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. See Abi-Habib & Naar, 2024.
- 6 The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported in May 2024 that the proposed deal involved up to 6,500 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs)—guidance kits that turn unguided bombs into precision-guided munitions (Youssef & Lubold, 2024).
- 7 See the citations at the beginning of the article: Biden made a connection between the war in Ukraine and the Gaza War (Kempe, 2023); and Zelensky also condemned Hamas, likening the group’s tactics to those of Russia (Rosenzweig-Ziff, 2023).
- 8 See for example Vaughan-Williams, 2021; Kirchick, 2019, 51–58; and Singh, 2021, 250–269.



American Strategy and Policy toward China

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This article analyzes American strategy and policy toward China with a focus on the period of the Biden Administration. Its aim is to facilitate a better understanding of how the United States views the challenge from China, to understand how it affects Israel and to make policy recommendations vis-à-vis one of the main strategic issues of the coming decade and, we can assume, beyond.

The article has been written at a time when the rivalry between the major world powers is intensifying and the United States is escalating its actions vis-à-vis China through what it defines as “responsible competition” (in an attempt to avoid dragging the rivalry into dangerous situations—such as military conflict), and also expecting its partners to adopt a policy toward China that suits Washington’s approach. At the time of writing, the United States appears to have consolidated a relatively coherent approach, regarding the threat posed by China and its strategy to contend with this threat, which remained fundamentally unchanged from the first Trump Administration to the Biden Administration. However, this approach’s translation into policy and specific measures in practice, is still being shaped and undergoing changes, especially in light of other political considerations at home, a global reality with many challenges, and the Chinese response to the United States’ measures. In addition, the U.S. is not neglecting military preparations for a confrontation with China and regards 2027 as a year with the potential for escalation regarding Taiwan.

The shock waves of the global power competition are already being felt in Israel, with China’s adoption of a harsh policy against Israel since October 7 and its efforts to exploit the war to damage the standing of the United States—which is Israel’s most important strategic ally. For this reason, decision makers in Israel should pursue continuous, ongoing engagement on the issue, with the aim of updating Israel’s policy toward the two world powers in light of the developments. At the same time, they must recognize that the Chinese challenge is the top US priority, which will dictate policy in the second half of the decade, and that Israel is advised to make sure it remains relevant and a valuable partner for the United States in this context.

Keywords: United States, China, Great Power Competition, technology, Israel, Middle East.

The Development of American Strategy toward China

The Biden Administration, like its predecessor, viewed China as the major challenge facing the United States in the twenty-first century, building around it the concept of Great Power Competition (GPC). Thus, China is defined as the pacing threat for which the U.S. defense establishment must prepare and engage in force building, with the year 2027 regarded as the target for readiness in this area.

At this stage, the United States identifies China as a complex challenge with diverse military, economic, ideological, technological, and strategic dimensions. It also views China as the only country with the intention and the capabilities (economic, political, military, and technological) to challenge the United States and the liberal world order constructed since World War II. Still, the U.S. strives to conduct its relationship with China without being dragged into military escalation, but rather as responsible strategic competition involving cooperative endeavors where needed.

The perception of China as a strategic threat is a relatively new development, from the past 15 years. While the U.S. already viewed China as a security threat at the outset of the twenty-first century (as reflected in statements by presidential candidate George W. Bush in 2000 that China was a “strategic competitor”), it thought that China’s rise could be managed in a way that would minimize the threat and turn Beijing into a responsible actor. These hopes, however, were frustrated by China’s strategic approach in the military and the economic domains. In the 1970s, removing China from the Soviet camp and China’s willingness to maintain constructive relations with the United States, was an immense achievement of U.S. foreign policy, and in the 1980s and 1990s, China-U.S. relations moved forward primarily in the promotion of economic relations and in American criticism of domestic aspects of China (especially following the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989). The leading American approach

during this period was the desire to help China advance and develop as an important actor that would be non-challenging in the international realm, including support of China’s acceptance into the World Trade Organization in 2000.

At this stage, the United States identifies China as a complex challenge with diverse military, economic, ideological, technological, and strategic dimensions. It also views China as the only country with the intention and the capabilities (economic, political, military, and technological) to challenge the United States and the liberal world order constructed since World War II.

As China continued to grow stronger and emerged as an economic power in the 2000s, the United States began to view it in a much more critical light (the establishment of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission in 2000 is a good example for the more critical approach the U.S. began to take). Its focus was on China’s economic conduct, as reflected in its violation of the intellectual property of U.S. companies and the adoption of competition strategies that Washington viewed as unfair and exploitative (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, n.d.). U.S. policy at this time focused on managing China’s rise and requiring it to become a responsible actor that supported the world order and did not disrupt it. At the same time, China persevered with a traditional strategy of “bide your time, hide your strength”; took advantage of the fact that American and global attention was focused elsewhere after the September 11 attacks; and refrained from blatantly challenging the United States. At that time, dealing directly with China’s challenge to US interests was not the main focus of US administrations.

This approach guided American policy during the Obama Administration (particularly during its first term). However, as China increasingly abandoned the approach of “waiting patiently” and adopted an aggressive revanchist policy in

the South and East China Sea, the U.S. shifted to the view that China was both a concrete military threat and a hostile actor, as opposed to a strictly competitive one. The change was spurred by China's moves to seize control of islands, shoals, and atolls in the region of the East and South China Seas by constructing military bases on them, in an effort to enforce its view that the South China Sea in its entirety (the "nine dash line") falls under its sovereignty. It was further reinforced by China's increasing friction with its neighbors and with the United States in maritime and air space of the East and South China Seas.

These measures, in addition to China's accelerated military buildup and more assertive approach in the political and economic domains, led the United States to fundamentally change its approach and to rank China as the leading military, economic, and strategic threat to the U.S. This development was accompanied by hard feelings in Washington and by genuine concern that the United States had erred strategically, neglecting the region of Southeast Asia while focusing on the security problems of the Middle East, and in this way had enabled China to accumulate military power that could challenge the United States in the most central and quickly growing region of the twenty-first century.

As a result, the United States began to enact a policy of diverting strategic focus to Asia (Pivot to Asia) under the Obama Administration, and with greater intensity under the first Trump and the Biden administrations, which identified China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) as the leading "pacing threat" to the United States and began to take action against it in a wide variety of realms.

The main expressions of China's importance are found in documents pertaining to the national security strategy of the Trump Administration (2017) and the Biden Administration (2022), which were subsequently translated into security policy documents that were also focused on China. Along the way, more focused strategies were developed, such as "the strategy

for the Indo-Pacific region" (The White House, 2022a) and the building of "resilient supply chains" (The White House, 2021b), as well as regional alliances such as AUKUS and Quad-I.

U.S. concern regarding the rise of China is anchored in several strategic developments:

- **Erosion of the relative advantages that established the U.S. as a leading world power.** This erosion has stemmed from focus on the Global War on Terror (GWOt); from the neglect of proper responses to great power rivals, against the background of the fall of the Soviet Union and Russia's relative weakness; from unsatisfactory engagement in preparing the U.S. economy for the challenges of tomorrow; and from the lack of a satisfactory response to China's unfair economic competition.
- **China's increasing strength and power.** China is on the way to becoming the world's largest economy (and has already become the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing power). It has developed broad civilian production abilities, with heavy and light industry including the processing of metal, shipyards, and, in recent years, also the production of automobile and aircraft parts (Cordesman, 2021, p. 29); established operative and quantitative military advantages in the region of Southeast Asia with the construction of military bases in the South China Sea; achieved marked expansion in the size of its navy and its inventory of surface-to-surface missiles; has been engaged in the ongoing quantitative increase of its nuclear arsenal; developed various forms of strategic-economic leverage (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 21 ,17 ,15) vis-à-vis a variety of actors around the world; and is willing to leverage its civilian economic power for the sake of military and security power (U.S. Department of State. n.d.). At the same time, from the American perspective, China also possesses

an important advantage in terms of mining and processing rare earth elements, which are essential for the manufacturing of all kinds of technological products, including advanced weaponry. The United States still has no effective response to China's dominance in this realm (Tracy, 2020, pp. 9,3). In American eyes, China's economic power (as opposed to the Soviet Union) provides it with the economic ability to support the building of a high quality, comprehensive military force, and simultaneously to take advantage of economic influence and leverage on different actors (including partners of the United States), in order to challenge the world order and strive to reshape it.

- **Chinese Aggression.** In America's view, **China is already taking advantage of its power and conducting an aggressive policy, primarily in Southeast Asia**, in the civil, military, and "grey" realms (such as the use of fishing fleets, coast guard vessels, and civilian maritime vessels to create friction). It is also **threatening the use of force against Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines**, which has been accompanied by ongoing regular harassment of these countries' defense forces in the air and at sea, including military maneuvers in their environs. This is in addition to China's implementation of **means of control and repression** (technology-based) in Hong Kong (U.S. Department of State, 2021c, 2021d), in China itself, and especially in Xinjiang. The United States relates to these actions as crimes against humanity and genocide (U.S. Department of State, 2021a). Moreover, the United States is concerned that China has accelerated its efforts to achieve military readiness for a scenario in which Taiwan is unified with China by force and has specified the year 2027 as the target for achieving military readiness for this purpose (not necessarily for carrying it out).
- **The expansion of China's access around the world**, including closer economic relations with almost all the world's countries. This

access includes the establishment and operation of infrastructure in the realm of transportation (ports and trains) and communication infrastructure based on Chinese technology and knowledge, in a manner that provides ongoing, long-term access to the countries that make use of them and increasing influence on their management, to the point of active coercion. The mounting concern in the United States is that Chinese influence will enable Beijing to neutralize coordinated political and economic measures taken against it, as well as to change the current world order into one that is less liberal and rule-oriented.

From an American perspective, the main scenario of reference for the evolution of the threat from China is the expansion of Chinese influence and China's transformation into a world power through: **building extensive military power, solidifying influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region, and forcing the United States out of the region.** At the same time, concerns are increasing that China could also develop global access and technological and economic leadership as a basis for turning itself into a world power, and use them to undermine American partnerships around the globe and the rule-based world order (Brunnstrom & Martina, 2021).

The American strategy under the Biden Administration was based on **the identification of the coming decade as decisive in terms of a wide variety of strategic developments that will shape the global reality during the current century, most notably in coping with the climate crisis and the rise of China** (The White House, 2022c).

The Biden Administration specified three tenets of the competition with China: **1. Invest, 2. Align, 3. Compete.**

1. Invest: Enhance domestic power (investing in the U.S.'s national power to maintain a competitive edge)—on the assumption that the key to long term success lies in **scientific and technological innovation** and taking full

advantage of the opportunity of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (major advances in technology, based on full utilization of big data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning), in addition to strengthening democracy and equality in the United States. The administration identified the building of resilience in American society and the U.S. economy, including the reinforcement of civil infrastructure, the rehabilitation of infrastructure for industrial production, the protection of supply chains, and the development of those chains that are not dependent on China. In the military dimension, the United States is striving to build enduring advantages in terms of quality, quantity, and technology vis-à-vis China (and other rivals), by accelerating the processes of force-buildup, and the development and assimilation of new technologies and tools. The main motivating factor behind these processes is the understanding that whoever develops and assimilates these technologies first, enjoys a major enduring advantage and that it is therefore essential to prevent China from doing so before the United States (National Intelligence Council, 2021, p. 93).

2. Align: Generating a coordinated policy between the United States and the network of allies and partners who have common interests and goals. Specifically, the Biden Administration emphasized the importance of **ideological competition** as a major dimension and positioned the United States as the leader of the **struggle between democracies and autocracies**, which, led by China, strive to change the rules of conduct in the international arena. At the same time, however, the Administration recognized that not all its partners hold values that are identical to those of the United States.

3. Compete: Responsible competition, which should focus on competing for economic and technological dominance. The Biden administration made efforts to prevent the competition with China from escalating militarily and, at the same time, left a space

for cooperation in essential areas such as contending with the climate challenge, the outbreak of pandemics, and the proliferation of drugs and weapons of mass destruction. In this context, senior members of the administration utilized the term “de-risk” to describe the aim of the various American measures employed in the relationship (The White House, 2024a).

In the **strategic-security context**, the United States under Biden strove to base its activity vis-à-vis China (and other rivals) on several operational ideas (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022):

- **Integrated deterrence**, which represents a connection between all domain American operations and the myriad of U.S. partners. Its aim is to deny the enemy from realizing its objectives, to raise the price of aggression, and to reduce the benefits to the aggressor, while reinforcing the resilience of those under threat.
- **Campaigning**—using a wide variety of tools, alongside allies (exercises, training, and military presence) in a coordinated manner—to reduce a rival’s freedom of action and disrupt its force build up and its ability to employ it effectively.
- **Building resilience**, by increasing the ability of the public, the homeland, and the fighting forces to contend with a variety of challenges (from cyber activity to epidemics and the climate crisis), particularly against enemies actively trying to harm U.S. resilience. The United States also ascribes importance to building the resilience of its partners to contend with these challenges.

At the same time, **in areas that are not purely security-related**, the United States is still at the stage of diagnosing and analyzing the challenge China represents. This includes gaining a deeper understanding of its own dependence and that of its partners on Chinese-dominated supply chains, including in areas that are vital to national security such as rare earth elements and renewable energies. Both the Biden and second Trump administrations are continually

shaping and adapting the specifics of their strategy and policy toward China in these contexts.

However, we can also note other efforts in aspects of non-military competition that are meant to achieve the following goals:

- To delay Chinese technological advancement and even halt it altogether in critical areas, most importantly the design and production of the advanced microchips that are critical for technological progress in other core technological and manufacturing areas, such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and machine learning.
- The disruption of China's ability to build and operate critical infrastructure around the world, with an emphasis on the realm of communication (primarily 5G) and transportation (seaports and airports).
- The disruption of the measures taken by China to acquire technology from the West, with an emphasis on the close supervision of students, research and development personnel, and Chinese companies, to prevent the transfer of technology.
- Increased attention on the social aspects of the competition, particularly China's ability to influence social media in the United States (mainly via TikTok) while also supervising the Chinese networks and closing them to the West.
- Reducing China's economic influence and access—this was the main focus of the first Trump administration policies and, it is reasonable to assume, will characterize his second administration as well. This policy has been referred to as the “trade war” and it included the imposition of large-scale tariffs, declaring China a currency manipulator, and putting pressure on U.S. partners to reduce economic cooperation with China (particularly in the contexts of infrastructure and communications). The Biden Administration continued this approach but focused more on discourse with partners and less on direct pressure on

China, although at the end of his term (May 2024) Biden also announced the expansion of tariffs on China.

The Components of American Policy Toward China

American strategy in the Chinese context may appear to be coherent and backed up by a variety of strategic documents. However, it still does not contend with the gap between American aspirations and interests on the one hand, and the strategic, economic, and technological reality that has come into being in recent decades on the other hand. Moreover, the process of translating the evolving strategy into policy and actions on the ground can be expected to take a long time and to encounter difficulties, dilemmas, compromises, and the opposition of various actors at home and abroad. At this stage, we note decisions and steps that are already underway, although it is still too early to fully evaluate their effectiveness in achieving the defined goals.

On the one hand the United States is pressured to take swift action because of the combination of the existing Chinese security threat (in the South China Sea, Taiwan, the cyber domain, and with surprises such as spy balloons) that will expand in the future (the Chinese navy, surface-to-surface missiles and rockets, and nuclear weapons), the concrete danger of further degradation of the American technological advantage, and China's growing influence in world economic centers. On the other hand, there are also significant factors restraining the American administration, such as China's deep economic ties with all countries of the world. This includes the two countries' economic interdependence; other important global priorities, such as the war in Ukraine (which itself constitutes a challenge requiring resources and attention, with the potential to change the world order) and the wars in the Middle East, in addition to a desire to preserve a constructive relationship with China on several issues (such as climate change). At the same

time, the economic sector is also signaling a desire to reduce its ties to China. Thus, although 2022 marked a peak in interstate trade (Donnan, 2022), the scope of trade in 2023 plummeted by 16.7% (reflecting a decline of approximately 4% in exports to China and 20% in imports from China, putting them at their lowest level since 2012). These trends remained stable in 2024 (an increase of 1.7% in imports from China in the first 10 months of 2024, and a 30% reduction in exports to China) (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

In practice, the Biden Administration adopted **a particularly aggressive policy toward China, focusing on imposing diverse restrictions in the technological realm, and establishing a tapestry of military and economic alliances against it, whose overall effect was a reduction of the economic ties between the countries.** Simultaneously, the administration strived to reduce the potential for military escalation, and nurtured channels of communication while continuing cooperative efforts in defined areas reflecting shared interests (such as climate). Senior administration officials referred to these measures as “guardrails,” which were meant to prevent an “accident” in relations between the countries that could lead to the use of force, and to keep both sides on the path of cooperation.

At the same time, U.S. policy toward China has been influenced by the deep rift in American politics. The administration has had difficulty advancing laws allocating essential resources to competition with China (such as a delay of almost two years in the CHIPS and Science Act, which was signed into law on August 9, 2022, although a previous version of the law with bipartisan support was already presented in May 2020), and the United States’ difficulty in furthering policy due to gaps and crises in the functioning of Congress, has cast a shadow over its image and status. It has also made it more difficult to argue the superiority of the democratic system over the autocratic approach, which the administration has deployed as a central element of contending with China. The

apparent consensus regarding the challenge posed by China often fails to overcome the deep political divide and makes it difficult to develop bipartisan policy in Washington.

The Biden Administration’s policy toward China was based on the three formal principles outlined above (invest, align, compete), in addition to a fourth principle that appears in practice to serve as the major policy focus: maintaining “as great a technological advantage as possible” over China (Sullivan, 2022).

“Given the foundational nature of certain technologies, such as advanced logic and memory chips, we must maintain as large of a lead as possible.”
U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, September 16, 2022.

The Domestic Economic Dimension: Investing in Domestic Power

Sustaining and enhancing American domestic power was focused on several fields: economy, technology, liberal democratic values, and the building of military power **to meet a challenge from a peer or near-peer enemy. This was in addition to avoiding strategic distractions, such as additional wars in the Middle East.** The cornerstone of maintaining American power is strengthening and rebuilding the economy:

- **Rebuilding infrastructure, extracting the economy from the crisis caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, and advancing the transition to clean energy.** In this context, the Biden administration enacted laws such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (November 2021), which dealt with rebuilding and improving infrastructure in the United States (including renewable energy, transportation infrastructure, and reinforcing infrastructure resilience); the Inflation Reduction Act (August 2022), which included subsidies for the transition

to efficient energy technologies, electric automobiles, and the like; and the CHIPS and Science Act (enacted in August 2022, after the legislation was delayed in Congress for more than three years), which provides \$52.7 billion in incentives for investment in the chip sector in the United States, in addition to \$20 billion to encourage training and study in the sciences through grants of the National Science Foundation. However, officials in the United States also understand that incentives alone cannot fundamentally change the supply chains and the map of world chip production (Badlam et al., 2022; The White House, n.d.; The White House, 2022b; U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, 2022).

- In the eyes of the Biden Administration, socially-oriented budget allocations, and not only investments in infrastructure, were directly related to the country's ability to compete with China, or at least were justified in the name of this competition (Office of Management and Budget, 2021, pp. 10-11). In past administrations, such as the Obama Administration, enhancing America's power was based on the energy independence achieved by the oil shale revolution and the United States' transformation into an energy exporter, as related by National Security Advisor Tom Donilon (The White House, 2013). The statements of the second Trump Administration thus far reflect a desire to return to basing American power on energy independence and the production of oil and natural gas.
- **Building economic resilience and avoiding dependence on China in critical areas**, primarily by mapping supply chains and promoting alternatives to the Chinese components they include, in addition to strengthening cyber defenses. The Biden Administration implemented a broad plan for mapping supply chains in critical realms (which were based on the efforts of previous administrations), including the production

of microchips, energy-rich batteries, rare earth elements and raw materials, and supplies to the medical sector. The Biden Administration understood that China was using underhanded tactics to increase its economic status, to grant advantages to local industries, and to control supply chains in critical areas which require the United States to be vigilant (The White House, 2021b, p. 7, 9, 11).

- As part of the administration's plan, recommendations were developed to expand legislation pertaining to the protection of supply chains; encourage local production and consumption; increase government investments in the development of technologies and production in critical areas; use special tools (such as the Defense Production Act and inspections based on Section 232¹) to expand local production and defend against imports; strengthen the ability to produce and manufacture essential minerals; expand cooperative efforts on the issue of supply chains; and establish bodies to monitor and take action (a task force) regarding supply chains. It should be emphasized that the Five Eyes intelligence alliance (the United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) undertook a mapping of dependence on China in various supply and trade chains, which found deep and extensive dependence on China, including in areas related to national security (Rogers et al., 2020; The White House, 2021b).
- At the same time, the US administration (during Trump's first term) employed punitive economic measures against what was perceived as the use of unfair means by China in its economic activity (such as devaluing the Yuan exchange rate to encourage exports and limit imports, restrictions on U.S. exports to China, and more). In this framework, the first Trump Administration imposed tariffs and restrictions on the import of products from China to the United States and

declared China a “currency manipulator,” along with additional measures (referred to collectively as a “trade war”). The Biden Administration added trade restrictions and additional tariffs on a variety of products (steel, aluminum, batteries, electric vehicles, medical equipment, chips, minerals, etc.) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024).

The Biden Administration defined the expansion and intensification of cooperative efforts with allies and partners as one of the pillars of its strategy, with an emphasis on competing with China. In this framework, the United States expanded its cooperation with major actors in the Indo-Pacific region, most significantly India, Japan, and Australia (Quad), Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea.

The Geopolitical Dimension: Making Full Use of the U.S.’ Network of Partners

The Biden Administration defined the expansion and intensification of cooperative efforts with allies and partners as one of the pillars of its strategy, with an emphasis on competing with China. In this framework, the United States expanded its cooperation with major actors in the Indo-Pacific region, most significantly India, Japan, and Australia (Quad), Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea, through both bilateral cooperation and the establishment of multi-actor groups such as Quad and AUKUS. At the same time, the U.S. has launched regional initiatives, such as the IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity), which was intended to promote economic relationships with U.S. partners in the region (Arcesati, 2022). In addition, the dialogue with NATO, with the countries of Europe (The Netherlands and Great Britain), and with the European Union itself has been greatly expanded pertaining to the challenges posed by China and the ways of contending

with them (such as the establishment of the Trade and Technology Council).

Major Cooperative Efforts with Allies:

- One of the prominent achievements of American diplomacy in this context has been the signing of agreements with **Japan** and the Netherlands regarding limitations on the sale of equipment to China **for producing advanced chips**. ASML, the Dutch manufacturer of chip carving equipment (lithography), has a de-facto monopoly over the production of machines for manufacturing highly advanced chips (using advanced technologies for the production of chips that are smaller than 10 nanometers), and the Netherlands’ acquiesce (and apparently that of the company itself) to impose restrictions on the export of high-end equipment technology to China may result in a significant delay in China’s ability to produce and develop advanced chips. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that China itself regards these measures as an attempt to limit and repress it and is increasing its efforts in this realm (Asia Financial, 2024).
- **India**—The United States has accelerated a variety of cooperative efforts with India, including strengthening economic relations and striving to develop the Indian economy as an alternative to dependence on Chinese supply chains; diverse cooperative efforts in the realm of security; and arms deals worth a total of \$20 billion between 2008 and 2020 (while signing security protocols regarding communication, logistics, and the protection of industries, opening the door to additional progress in the future) (Kaushik & Brunnstrom, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025; Vergun, 2023). Both countries established the 2+2 Forum for strategic dialogue between their defense ministers and their foreign affairs ministers. The Trump and Biden administrations also invested in promoting personal relations with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and were also willing to tolerate controversial Indian

measures at the domestic level, without criticism on the part of the United States (such as ending the autonomy for the Jammu and Kashmir districts, and disregarding the adoption of pro-Hindu policies that create friction with Muslim and Christian minorities and with the opposition) (Singh, 2022).

- **Japan is seen** as an essential ally in the contest of China, in the security, economic, and technological fields, especially due to the fact that it, too, is involved in a territorial dispute and military friction with China surrounding the Senkaku Islands (the Diaoyu Islands), over which both countries claim ownership. This dispute also highlights residual tensions from World War II between Japan and China, and the combined effect of which has led Japan and the United States to adopt a common approach, rejecting China's claims for sovereignty in the South and East China Sea, and its attempt to change the status quo in these regions (The White House, 2021b). Concrete examples of Japan's value to the U.S. include:

- From a security perspective, a significant part of the American assets in the Indo-Pacific are located in Japan, including an aircraft carrier group, F35- fighter plane squadrons, and approximately 55,000 troops. Japan also has advanced armed forces (self-defense force; primarily its navy, submarines, and air force) that has been built up in recent years. For this reason, Japan holds critical significance for America's capacity for operational and logistical activity in Southeast Asia (including in the context of a possible Taiwan conflict).
- The advanced Japanese economy is perceived as an important factor in creating an economic block to stand against Chinese economic power and to serve as another prominent element of creating alternative supply chains to those of China (for example, in the field of rare earth elements).

- On a technological level, Japan is viewed as a world power in manufacturing and robotics (including in the realm of chip production), and its support is important in American eyes for maintaining America's qualitative technological advantage over China, and for preventing the transfer of advanced technology to Beijing.
- Japan's own policies are consistent with American interests and it thus helps promote them and create cooperative efforts in the region. Japan has strived to promote cooperation with India, helped establish the Quad, and was responsible for developing the idea of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which emphasizes the connection between Asia and Africa, maintaining the rules-based order and the freedom of navigation, and promoting prosperity in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024).
- **The European Union**—The United States has promoted cooperative efforts with the European Union and major European countries on a variety of issues related to China, most prominently raising awareness regarding China's influence in Europe and the strategic leverage it is accumulating through control of shipping infrastructure, ports, and communications. In this context, they established the Trade and Technology Council to promote initiatives and a shared policy toward China, as in the realms of rare earth elements and important supply chains (such as solar panels), in addition to establishing a task force to deal with China in the realm of communications infrastructure (Arcesati, 2022). The European Union also lent its support to the effort to diversify supply chains and the technological competition that the United States promotes in the chip sector, enacting the European Chips Act, which includes an allocation of 43 billion Euros to the issue (European Commission, 2022).

Still, Europe is having difficulty developing a uniform policy toward China. Some European countries (Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Poland) are pushing for a tougher approach, while others (such as Greece, Hungary, and Italy) are calling for maintaining economic cooperative efforts with Beijing. Germany and France are also displaying caution regarding measures that would negatively impact this realm and are striving for reduced risks, not economic detachment (Downes et al., 2023; Pollard 2023). This dual approach on the part of Europe has also found expression in visits to China by senior officials, e.g., by figures such as France's President Macron (April 2023) and German Chancellor Scholz (November 2022), which were characterized primarily by an effort to reduce disagreements and to promote a business agenda. During later visits, such as Scholz's trip in April 2024, the parties still sought cooperation, although the tensions between the countries were already clearer (France in the United Kingdom, 2023; McElwee, 2022; Stevenson & Eddy, 2024). Thus, China invested diplomatic efforts in more friendly European countries, such as Hungary (Orban's July 8 visit), Italy (Meloni's July 28 visit), and even critics such as Poland (President Duda's June 24 visit). President Xi undertook a trip to Europe (May 2024) during which he visited Serbia, Hungary, and France, focusing on mobilizing support for China's political and economic relationship with Europe (Euronews with AP, 2024; Fehér, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Vagnoni & Chen, 2024).

- **Creating New Frameworks for Cooperation, led by AUKUS** (the United States, Britain, and Australia) **and Quad** (Japan, India, Australia, and the United States). These frameworks were meant to lay the basis for diverse cooperative efforts and the creation of a regional architecture as a counterweight against increased Chinese power and China's readiness to use coercion towards various countries in the region in the context of local

conflicts (with the Philippines, Vietnam, and small island nations). Thus, whereas AUKUS was originally a cooperative effort in the military realm aimed at upgrading Australia's military force-buildup, with an emphasis on nuclear submarines but also including other elements, Quad was initially meant to serve not as a military alliance, but rather as means of strategic coordination between countries on a variety of issues, including China (Hemmings, 2022; U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). These frameworks facilitate ongoing, regular discussion regarding major issues related primarily to China, as well as periodic meetings to further them, while also expanding the issues and the areas in which the parties engage. In this context, the partners in the various frameworks are already proposing ideas for their expansion. Thus, AUKUS+ is meant to include other areas of cooperation, beyond nuclear submarines, and Prime Minister Morrison of Australia has already suggested also involving Japan (Scott Morrison, 2024). Quad+ constitutes an effort to expand cooperative undertakings as part of Quad to additional countries, including New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam in the region, and Brazil and Israel outside of it (Panda, 2022).

- **The United States** has also intensified its cooperative efforts with other major actors in the region, including South Korea, the Philippines (although cooperative efforts with Manila has experienced ups and downs during Duterte's presidency), Vietnam (cooperation between the countries was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in September 2023) (U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, 2023), and Indonesia (in November 2024, the two countries marked 75 years of diplomatic relations and committed to expanding the range of cooperative efforts; on the issue of security, both parties committed to conducting a joint exercise in the first quarter of 2025) (The White House, 2024b).

Another component being promoted by the United States through its various cooperative undertakings is criticism of China's domestic policy, with an emphasis on extensive human rights violations against the Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang region (the United States treats these violations as crimes against humanity and genocide), the reduced autonomy of Hong Kong, and the significant intensification of control over the Chinese population by digital means (U.S. Department of State, 2021b, 2021d). Thus, the G7 members states, South Korea, the European Union, and countries in Europe have been critical of Chinese activity in these areas, and in October 2022 the United States led a group of 50 nations (including Israel) in adopting a statement calling on the U.N. to investigate the accusations against China (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2022).

Another aspect of the American campaign against China has been an effort to reduce China's economic clout, notwithstanding the campaign against its technological rise. Under the first Trump Administration, the campaign (dubbed "the trade war") was reflected in its declaration of China as a currency manipulator and the imposition of tariffs on products imported from China through a number of stages since 2018 (affecting a total of \$335 billion in imports from China), as well as an ongoing campaign vis-à-vis America's partners to reduce economic cooperation with China in a variety of realms, with an emphasis on stopping China's momentum in building and operating large national infrastructure projects (ports, large construction projects) in many countries around the world, (including major Western countries), and 4G and especially 5G cellular communication infrastructure. The Biden Administration continued this approach, but initially focused on mobilizing partners as opposed to expanding tariffs on China. However, toward the end of his term (May 2024), the president announced a substantial expansion of tariffs on China in a variety of areas, such as steel and aluminum, chips, electric vehicles, and more.

Another element of reducing Beijing's clout has been the United States' political campaign against China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI). The BRI has been depicted as a measure aiming to lead its partners into a "debt trap," with the goal of China seizing control of strategic assets and most importantly critical national infrastructure and assets that are important to its global access, such as the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The United States also engaged in initiatives to provide alternative sources of finance and investment to developing nations in an attempt to reduce the attractiveness of Chinese investments and promote western alternatives (Written Testimony of Geoffrey R. Pyatt, 2023). Information published on the Belt and Road initiative shows that, since 2018-2019, the scope of new projects it encompasses has begun to contract, but not due to the influence of the American campaign (Clark, 2023).

At the same time, the U.S. also used its influence in NATO and the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance, to channel these alliances into contending with the challenge posed by China. Thus, several years ago, for the first time, NATO classified China as a threat that must be addressed, and the Five Eyes group decided to devote resources to China and also to coordinate activity regarding China at the political level (despite the reservations of New Zealand). The United States has also intensified its cooperative efforts with law enforcement agencies of allied countries regarding suspicious Chinese activity, particularly the threat China posed to dissidents living outside China, and the growing risk of technology theft and espionage (Perez, 2022).

The Middle East is also an arena of increasing competition between the great powers, as the United States attempts to limit China's influence. The region is characterized by the increased influence and presence of China, which is the main economic partner of most countries in the region (it is the main source of oil to China and a growing market for Chinese exports); the increased use of Chinese technology

(such as 5G in the Gulf and in Saudi Arabia); extensive proliferation of Chinese-made UAVs (technology that the United States has thus far refused to export to the region); and distress in local countries that the United States is aiming to reduce its presence in the region after two decades of direct military involvement. Overall, the United States is actively pursuing its regional partners, especially in the gulf, to reduce Chinese access and involvement in the technological and security realms, and has specifically managed to prevent Chinese military presence in the United Arab Emirates. However, the U.S. is still finding it difficult to persuade its partners to reduce technological cooperation with China, and for this reason, for example, it refrained from supplying F-35 fighter planes to the United Arab Emirates, due to its refusal to curtail Chinese 5G networks in the country (Bo Lillis et al., 2021; Bowman et al., 2021; Reuters, 2021).

The United States has recognized the growing possibility for a military escalation with China in the near future. For example, the former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley stated that, in accordance with the instruction of the president of China, the Chinese military is striving to reach military readiness to conquer Taiwan by the year 2027.

Establishing “responsible competition” and preventing military escalation in the short-term

The United States has recognized the growing possibility for a military escalation with China in the near future. For example, the former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley stated that, in accordance with the instruction of the president of China, the Chinese military is striving to reach military readiness to conquer Taiwan by the year 2027, whereas other senior officials have argued that the target date for Chinese readiness has been moved up, and that the armed forces need

to prepare for war prior to 2025 (AsiaNews, 2022; Kube & Gains, 2023; LaGrone, 2021; Sevastopulo, 2022). Furthermore, the United States articulated that it would not shy from conflict in defense of Taiwan—the Biden Administration made clear its commitment to the defense of Taiwan, and the president himself made an unusual statement regarding willingness to use American force to defend the island in the event of a military escalation (Ni, 2022), even though the president’s advisors were quick to walk back the statement (Parker & Pager, 2022).

In addition to concerns regarding military escalation, the projected costs of which will be immense in terms of the scope of casualties and the damage to the U.S and global economy (a war game conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies simulating the first campaign of the war shows how bloody and expensive it is likely to be), the U.S. recognizes that cooperation between the two major world powers is important to contend with global challenges such as global warming, in which China plays a central role, and to prevent additional erosion to pillars of the world order such as arms control agreements (Cancian et al., 2023).

The American approach reflects an understanding that the U.S. is not presently prepared for hostilities in Southeast Asia in a manner that would be acceptable in terms of cost and overall result, and that it must engage in rapid force-buildup in the area in order to be so. At the same time, China, too, is engaging in comprehensive force buildup and improving its overall capabilities and readiness. Accordingly, the United States has adopted several approaches to prevent escalation, reducing its likelihood and containing flashpoints (what is known as creating guardrails), or at least delaying it:

- **Publicly calling for “responsible competition,”** the essence of which is to prevent a process of rapid descent into hostilities and while still engaging

in cooperation in select areas—even in a reality of strategic competition between the powers. Thus, The United States attempted to promote cooperative efforts regarding climate and other issues, such as the smuggling of Fentanyl from China to the United States (while China is trying to create a link between the issues of competition and cooperation and to prevent them from being dealt with separately). At present, it is difficult to determine whether the American undertaking will succeed in leading China into the United States' preferred "comfort zone" in which the countries can compete aggressively in a few realms while cooperating in others (according to U.S. interests). Both powers appear to be focusing on shaping the overall rules of play between them according to mutual actions and responses.

- **Creating a secret high-level channel**, which is meant to reduce tensions in relations between the countries and to allow them to discuss different strategic issues, to create strategic clarity, and to avoid increasing the tensions between them. The goal of this activity is to create guardrails in the relationship between the two countries to serve as impediments to a serious and uncontrolled escalation in U.S.-China relations. This secret channel was established after a crisis in relations following the downing of a Chinese balloon that had been airborne over the United States; it was headed by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for the Americans and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. According to media reports, this channel has been essential for reducing tensions between the sides, for presenting important issues, and for kickstarting a process of thawing the relationship, which resulted in a summit attended by Biden and Xi in November 2023 and in continued discussion between the political echelons (Sevastopulo, 2024).
- Fast tracking processes of force buildup to improve readiness for war in Southeast Asia, such as comprehensive reform to the structure

of the Marines, whose implementation was accelerated in 2024 to improve war readiness (Eckstein, 2023; Macander et al., 2022; Rogan, 2022). The Pentagon is also accelerating the implementation of lessons from the fighting in Ukraine and closing significant gaps in the capacity and resiliency of the U.S. industrial base and the production required to support protracted and high intensity war against a peer enemy (Easley, 2023).

- The improvement of military readiness in order to deter China from engaging in opportunistic actions or military escalation. This was done by increasing the military presence in Southeast Asia, including exercises with partners in the region, "freedom of navigation" operations by American ships and regular flights in disputed regions, most notably the South China Sea (which China regards as under its sovereignty).

In any event, China appears to have identified Washington's apprehension with respect to military escalation in the Indo-Pacific region and to be striving to exploit it. Thus, China continues to issue bellicose statements regarding Taiwan, to increase its military presence around the island, and to maintain a regular schedule of military exercises in the area. It is also conducting maritime and air exercises with Russia (primarily in regions north of Japan), along with increasing the harassment of Taiwan's security forces by conducting incursions in the region, in the air and at sea, on a daily basis. At the same time, China appears to be demonstrating increased concern regarding American activities in the South China Sea, including freedom of navigation operations by the U.S. Navy in areas in which China claims ownership. These activities may be seen by Beijing as a preferred flashpoint with the U.S. than an escalation regarding Taiwan.

Maintaining America's Technological Advantage

Maintaining the American technological advantage was a guiding principle stressed

by the Biden Administration in its competition with China, as it is perceived as a major American advantage over China and a key to economic, military, and national power in the foreseeable future.

The Biden administration and numerous researchers **have identified technology as a major driver of the Fourth Industrial Revolution**, which is expected to fundamentally change the world economy, through the integration of big data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning into economic and social activities in the coming decades (see Appendix: The Main Areas of U.S. Focus in the Realm of Technology). Accordingly, the administration believed that whoever succeeds in controlling advanced technologies and assimilating them as quickly as possible will enjoy an “early adopter” advantage and a dominant strategic position, and it was decided to prevent China from doing so. The administration, among other things, feared that civilian technology would fuel the build-up of Chinese military forces—and identified a deep connection between these realms in China (known as Military-Civil Fusion)—and was concerned at the measures taken by Beijing to put civil and dual-use technologies under state and military control (U.S. State Department, n.d.).

This principle was a common thread throughout the Biden administration’s strategy vis-à-vis China, and the U.S. was willing to take aggressive measures in that regard, which included a series of measures aimed at **negating the access of Chinese companies to advanced technologies**, with a focus on the “chip war”—**an attempt to strip China of access to advanced chips**, which are perceived as the main factor facilitating technological development.

Thus, under the authority of the American Department of Commerce, Chinese companies are prevented from acquiring the ability to purchase advanced chips (primarily those used to train artificial intelligence, such as Nvidia A100), from accessing technology for the development and planning of chips and

for machines for engraving advanced chips (particularly those smaller than 10 nanometers), and from accessing diverse services related to such chips. The restrictions in this realm are so sweeping that all American citizens are prohibited from engaging in providing services or support to Chinese companies dealing with these technologies, including those employed in Chinese or foreign companies. The American administration also explored more severe measures to circumscribe China’s ability to engage in technological advancement and to require that American companies receive authorization for every transaction involving the provision of cloud technology services to Chinese companies (Kaur, 2023). Toward the end of its tenure, the Biden Administration issued far-reaching guidelines regarding the trade and export of chips intended for training artificial intelligence, which defined the yearly quota for advanced chips that every country is permitted to purchase, except for countries approved in advance by the United States, in addition to additional conditions and exclusions (Bureau of Industry & Security, 2025).

At the same time, through the use of other authorities, the United States has terminated access to the American market for Chinese communication companies associated with the PRC, which had been involved in building communications infrastructure in the United States and around world (such as Huawei and ZTE). These companies posed a risk of the transfer of extensive information about the West to China. The United States also tightened its control over Chinese citizens studying and working in the United States—mainly by the FBI (in testimony before Congress, the director of the FBI claimed that, in the Chinese context, “a new investigation is opened every 10 hours” (Conte et al., 2021; Dilanian, 2022)—and monitored the attempts by China to gain access to American companies possessing patents or sensitive technologies (for example, those related to submarine operation) (FBI, n.d.).

At the same time, the substantial American measures in the technological realm do not appear to have prevented Chinese companies from advancing in the field of artificial intelligence, and the advanced language model of the startup Deepseek demonstrated advanced performance at a much lower price than the competition, leading to a market shakeup (Baptista, 2025).

Conclusion

The United States is employing substantial and comprehensive efforts to compete with China. These efforts include the buildup of military capabilities and readiness, recruiting partners and influencing their policies, as well as focusing on maintaining the U.S.' leading position anchored in technological leadership.

Of all the American activity thus far, the distinct emphasis of the Biden Administration appears to have been on undercutting China's technological advancement and on strengthening American capabilities in the field, with a willingness to take especially aggressive measures, even at the price of undermining the relationship between the countries.

The United States under Biden also strived to recruit partners and allies against China, but understood the precarious position of most countries vis-à-vis China. Therefore, the U.S. was focusing on areas of common interests and preferences, such as preventing the forced transfer of technology, creating alternatives to economic dependence on China, and criticism of various human rights violations (a gap exists between the U.S. and various partners on the subject of human rights, as partners in Africa and the Middle East typically refrain from joining American criticism of China on the subject). Although the United States does not anticipate that its partners will sever their economic ties with China, it does emphasize the need to prevent dependence on China or excessive Chinese influence (for example, involvement in

large infrastructure projects, with an emphasis on ports).

In this context, even though the United States did not explicitly specify red lines for its partners with regard to China, it appears that actions that provide China with a technological or military advantage (such as giving the Chinese military access to seaports or advanced communications networks in the country) will be perceived by the United States extremely negatively.

At first glance, the second Trump Administration is not expected to fundamentally change the American approach to strategic competition with China, as it was formulated and promoted in the first Trump term (2017-2021), including the implementation of severe measures against China in the economic and technological realms. Still, it can be assumed that the new administration will show different emphases and a different style regarding competition with China, including preference for bilateral negotiations, a reduced emphasis on cooperative efforts with partners regarding China, a greater emphasis on increasing U.S. domestic power (such as lifting the restrictions and regulation of technology companies and increasing oil and gas production over renewable energy sources) and the extensive use of economic tools (such as tariffs and tolls).

The Significance for Israel

Strategic competition between China and the United States will continue to constitute a formative global driver in the decades to come. It is a dynamic feature of the evolving international system yet its specific manifestation may change over time, and may also engender serious crises between the world powers to the point of military clashes. The dynamics of relations between the great powers will include attempts to influence and cajole global partners as well as rivals, regarding political, economic, technological, and regulatory processes that occur in a variety of dimensions, including space, cyber, and at sea.

The competition between the powers is already influencing various aspects of Israel-U.S. relations, as the latter exerts ongoing pressure on Israel to tighten its control over Chinese activity in the country and to prevent a Chinese foothold in areas related to national security (for example, national infrastructure such as ports and communication). As part of its response, Israel established an advisory committee to examine foreign investments in the country and launched a dialogue with the United States on technology (which is supposed to promote common interests and approaches). This has occurred despite the fact that the economic relations between Israel and China continue to be characterized by a high level of mutual trade (despite a decline in 2023), as Chinese-manufactured cars have become more desirable in Israel in recent years, increasing the scope of trade.

The growing competition appears to have led China to adopt a tougher policy toward Israel, primarily as a means of undermining the United States. Thus, China chose to adopt a hostile policy toward Israel during the Iron Swords War. In addition, it has been a harsh critic of Israel, publicly supports the Palestinians and Iran, and helps Hamas whitewash its current pariah status (by hosting a summit for internal Palestinian conciliation on the subject). It has also enabled a wave of antisemitism and anti-Israelism in the tightly controlled Chinese social media (on social media in China itself and on TikTok).

Israel was thrust to a prominent role in the U.S.-China rivalry when the US Congress adopted measures against TikTok, demanding its sale to an American company or the cessation of its operation in the United States. This stemmed from the United States' concern that the app was serving as a conduit for Chinese influence and espionage in the United States. President Trump has ordered the Justice department not to implement the law for 75 days and gave an additional 75 days afterwards in order to facilitate a deal to sell the company.

Some opponents of the boycott against TikTok have argued that Israel is behind it, due to its accusations that the social network promotes an anti-Israel narrative during the war in Gaza and Lebanon (King, 2025). It is clear that China and its supporters do not hesitate to place the blame for congressional actions at the feet of Israel and Diaspora Jewry, and seem to consider continuing the attacks on Israel and its supporters as a measure with no real cost.

The Technological Dimension

From the perspective of the United States (as reflected in the Rand Institute's 2020 report), **Israel is an attractive target for China** because it is a hub of technological entrepreneurship that China covets and because the Israeli tech ecosystem has few, if any, regulatory obstacles to impede Chinese investment in the sector. At the same time, in Washington's view, **technology is at the core of the competition between the powers at the present** (Efron et al., 2020) and will therefore remain a constant point of interest for the United States' regarding Israel-China relations in the coming years.

Israel's willingness to allow Chinese investment in the Israeli high-tech industry—even in areas that the United States identifies as essential to its national security (biotechnology, cyber, artificial intelligence, and sensors), and including Chinese (and Russian) companies that are now subject to American sanctions or perceived by the US as a threat (Huawei)—raises concern in the United States, even though their activities are insignificant in relation to Western investment in this sector (and most of them have reduced their activity in Israel markedly). Moreover, some in the United States hold the opinion that China may strive to improve its technological ties with Israel as a way of countering the increasing American pressure on China in the technological field.

In the past, the United States has shown that it is willing to take far-reaching measures against Israel when it identifies the transfer of technology with military uses that could

harm America (the Harpy and Falcon crises). Recently, the United States took resolute measures against its partners in the Middle East by imposing supervision of the export of advanced chips to countries in the Middle East (such as AMD and Nvidia), out of concern that they could seep into China (Nellis & Cherney, 2023).

The technological domain currently lies at the core of American interests. It is therefore likely that should the U.S. perceive a threat to its national security emanating from Israeli-Chinese ties, that it will again adopt a particularly resolute approach, although it can be assumed that Washington will seek constructive discussion with Israel before using coercive measures. The aggressive American action against Israeli cyber companies (NSO, Candiru) that violated human rights by spying on American civilians, attests to America's willingness to adopt a resolute approach against Israeli companies when they are perceived as harming American interests.

The Bilateral Dimension

Israel is fundamentally connected to the United States, which is Israel's only reliable ally in the political and security domains, and Israel's only strategic partner in technological developments. From an economic perspective, the United States is Israel's main trade partner and an important destination for Israeli exports (for goods: \$14.2 billion in 2024, approximately one-quarter of overall Israeli exports; for services: approximately \$22.9 billion in 2024, accounting for approximately one-third of all service exports), as well as a main source of investment in Israeli companies. The United States also provides Israel with \$3.8 billion annually for defense acquisitions from the United States.

These connections are an expression of the tight fabric and close connections between Israel and the United States at every level, which enables the parties to share information on their interests and goals, to conduct joint or

coordinated activities, and to adapt policy measures and manage disagreements as they arise. In addition to the political components, ongoing positive connections between the populations of both countries are also relevant, with Israel enjoying a continuously positive public image in the U.S., although this image is eroding and reflecting greater polarization between conservatives and liberals in the country (especially after the war in Gaza).

The American defense establishment views Israel-China relations with great suspicion due to the historical record of Chinese-Israeli relations. The emphasis is on the fact that it was Israel who provided advanced military technology (like the Harpy UAV) to China, attempted to export advanced command and control technology (the Phalcon airborne early warning and control system) in a deal that was halted only after intense American pressure, and who is suspected of providing additional military technology to China in the 1990s.

In this context, it is worth noting that **the American defense establishment views Israel-China relations with great suspicion** due to the historical record of Chinese-Israeli relations. The emphasis is on the fact that it was Israel who provided advanced military technology (like the Harpy UAV) to China, attempted to export advanced command and control technology (the Phalcon airborne early warning and control system) in a deal that was halted only after intense American pressure, and who is suspected of providing additional military technology to China in the 1990s. These issues led to a serious crisis in relations between Israel and the U.S. in 2005, as well as to the reshaping of the bodies engaged in defense exports in Israel as a result of an American demand. Against this background, it can be assumed that the United States will continue to carefully observe Israel's conduct in controlling technologies and military equipment to ensure that they are

not provided to China (Tyler, 1992; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2004, pp. 200-201).

On the other hand, as Israel's third largest trade partner (after the European Union and the United States), China is an important actor for Israel, particularly from an economic perspective. In 2024, Israel imported \$15.9 billion dollars in goods from China (including Hong Kong) and exported to China approximately \$4.2 billion (Central Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). In recent years, Chinese companies have become significantly involved in the construction and operation of transportation infrastructure in Israel (trains, ports, etc.) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In the course of 2024, the importance of Chinese companies to the Israeli economy increased further, due to sanctions that Turkey imposed on Israel and the cessation of Palestinian employment in Israel. As a result, Chinese construction workers became critical for the building sector, and the significant increase in the importing of automobiles from China to Israel (accounting for approximately one-quarter of all cars bought in Israel during this period, a fourfold increase of the Chinese share of the market since the third quarter of 2023, and a 30-fold increase since the first quarter of 2020), which is only expected to increase in 2025 (Shayb & Carzone Technologies, 2024). Despite the closer economic ties, Israel's relations with China are not actually close. China is one of the most prominent critics of Israel in the international arena and a major partner of Israel's enemies, especially Iran.

In conclusion, Israel's bilateral relationships are oriented distinctly toward the United States, whose strategic importance for Israel is infinitely greater than that of China, despite the latter's increased global economic influence over the past decade. Accordingly, the United States' high expectations of all its partners—to adopt a cautious approach toward China and to refrain from steps that will harm America's position in its strategic competition with Beijing—could be accompanied by more intense

prodding, cajoling and persuasion, but also by an attempt to draw Israel into policies more aligned with the U.S. through carrots rather than sticks.

The Security Dimension

In the security dimension, the United States is, without question, Israel's most important ally. The Israeli security system relies to a large degree on American weapon systems and platforms, most of which are purchased using the extensive \$3.8 billion in annual American aid, or at least partially manufactured in the United States. American involvement in the region and Israel's cooperative efforts with the United States help promote Israel's security in the region directly and indirectly. The deep security connections and Israeli dependence on the United States (regarding aspects of air to surface munitions, for example) was laid bare during the Iron Swords War, when the United States stood beside Israel, providing it with large amounts of weaponry, but also limiting certain arms shipments due to policy disagreements between the two countries.

At the same time, China's force buildup is meant to contend with and neutralize the relative advantages of American weapons. This creates the potential for the provision of weapons to Israel's enemies and rivals by two powers (Russia and China), which develop weapons and other capabilities (space, combat intelligence, electronic warfare, and cyber) to neutralize the qualitative advantages of the weapons on which Israel relies to maintain military superiority.

American influence in the Middle East is for the most part a stabilizing force that is aligned with Israeli interests in the region, although it appears that China's presence and influence (especially civil and economic influence, but possibly also military in the future) in the Middle East is continuing to increase steadily. The more this trend continues, and China also implements its plans to integrate the Middle East as part of the "Belt and Road initiative" and

“the maritime Silk Road” and to strengthen its military presence in the region, the more the competition may create constraints on Israel’s regional policies or challenge America’s ability to reduce malign influences in the region.

At the same time, Israel may find itself becoming an increasingly valuable target for espionage attempts by China or Russia seeking technological and strategic intelligence, as part of their competition with the United States. Both may seek to acquire advanced Israeli technology and to gather information about the operational use of advanced American military technology by Israel.

Overall, it is in Israel’s security interest that the United States continue to be a prominent actor in the Middle East, and that U.S. fatigue with the region and its policies of reducing its military presence in the Middle East in recent years, do not lead to a significant decline in American influence. On a positive note, America’s willingness to invest significant military efforts in assisting Israel in the Swords of Iron War (including the mobilization of partners in the region to thwart the Iranian attacks on Israel) and recruiting a coalition to secure shipping routes in the Red Sea (with partial success) show that the U.S. commitment to Israel’s defense, was indeed ironclad. In addition, it appears that China’s influence is expected to continue to expand due to its growing importance to the economies of the countries in the region, and that the United States understands the need for policies and action to counterbalance China and to strengthen its partnerships in the region.

In light of Israel’s interest in maintaining American influence (particularly in the realm of security) in the region, the role of China and the changes it may cause to the security architecture in the region must be analyzed in greater depth. One prominent example of such changes is the United States’ interest in promoting a defensive treaty with Saudi Arabia, which would anchor the kingdom in the American sphere of influence

and reduce Riyadh’s gravitation toward China. A U.S.-Saudi deal has significant implications for Israel, including in context of normalization with Saudi Arabia.

The Regional Dimension

The Middle East and North Africa has been under U.S. dominance since the 1980s, when the United States worked to reduce Soviet influence and to establish a security architecture that emphasizes safeguarding the supply of energy to the West. It entails American security dominance among most major actors and American willingness to use force on behalf of its partners in the region or to act to remove threats against the regional security architecture.

The standing of the United States and the security architecture it created were weakened over the past 20 years due to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the “global war on terror”; its apparent lack of support for its partners in the Middle East during the Arab Spring; and the nuclear deal with Iran, which was largely perceived negatively in the region.

On the other hand, over the past two decades, China has increasingly expanded its influence and its foothold in the region, becoming the main economic partner of most countries in the Middle East, and particularly of rich oil exporters. China’s importance to these countries may grow even more over time as climate change is expected to cause the West to reduce imports of oil and natural gas from the region, while making exports to China much more essential.

The overall impact of these trends, indicate that Beijing’s influence in the Middle East is growing, while that of the United States is declining. As noted above, Israel has an interest in maintaining American influence in the region, at least in the security context; however, it must prepare for changes in the contours of regional interests and partnerships, as Chinese influence continues to increase and the competition between the great powers intensifies.

The Implications of the Swords of Iron War

During the Swords of Iron War, the Biden Administration employed various means across the Middle East in support of Israel. The U.S. president was quick to pay a visit to Israel at the beginning of the war, instructed two aircraft carrier groups to the region for an extended period in support of Israel, warned Israel's enemies not to take advantage of the situation or attempt to escalate ("Don't!"), and ordered the quick provision of a large quantity of military equipment to Israel in order to support and supplement its fighting abilities. After the Houthis joined the fighting and attacked shipping routes in the Red Sea, the United States established a coalition to protect these routes, it attacked targets in Yemen to degrade the Houthis' ability to target ships, and employed U.S. capabilities to disrupt and deny attacks against Israel originating from Yemen. Moreover, the United States was instrumental in the forging of an additional security coalition that aided Israel to counter the extensive Iranian attacks in April and October 2024, during which hundreds of U.A.V.s and missiles targeted Israel. The U.S. also deployed a THAAD battery to Israel to aid in intercepting them (Taylor et al., 2024).

America's backing of Israel caused tension between the United States and most of the international community, which distinctly sought a quick end to the war and a ceasefire, whereas the United States and Israel were of the opinion that doing so should occur only after Israel achieved its military objectives, including a deal for the release of hostages. Notwithstanding disagreements between Jerusalem and Washington on some issues, America's backing of Israel in the international arena remained strong, despite mounting criticism of President Biden at home and abroad (Bateman, 2024).

On the other hand, China has adopted a blatant anti-Israel position and has exploited the situation to level harsh criticism at the United States and Israel. During the first week of the

fighting, China already came to the conclusion that Israel "has crossed the line of self-defense... and must stop the collective punishment of the residents of Gaza" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2023). In this framework, China was fiercely critical of Israel, providing public backing to Iran, referred to the Israeli hostages as "detainees," and demanded that Israel halt the fighting without presenting relevant terms to the other side (such as abiding by UN Security Council Resolution 1701 regarding Hezbollah and the release of hostages by Hamas). Moreover, China appears to have given free rein to Israel critics on its highly state regulated domestic social media and on TikTok, in a manner that created a tidal wave of criticism and antisemitic expressions toward Israel and Jews (Lavie, 2024b; Gering & Dayan, 2024). As part of China's activity, it also hosted Hamas representatives for reconciliation talks with the Palestinian Authority on July 21-23, 2024, which concluded with the Beijing Declaration regarding the establishment of a "temporary unity government," while also giving legitimacy to Hamas (Lavie, 2024a).

America's extensive efforts to aid Israel seemed to serve Washington's vision of a regional security partnership focused primarily on contending with the Iranian threat; it also showed that the United States is willing to back up its partners in the region, and Israel in particular, in their times of great need in a manner that helped raise its credibility as the main security partner for many in the region (although its involvement has also drew criticism of its support of Israel and its willingness to "ignore" the human rights violations that it ostensibly carried out). American measures also sought to support the expanding the Abraham Accords, with an emphasis on Saudi Arabia, although the latter displayed a lack of desire to do so during the war.

At the same time, China has positioned itself at the head of the parties denouncing Israel and supporting the Palestinians in general and Hamas in particular; stated in the International

Court of Justice that the Palestinians have the right to engage in “armed resistance” against Israel (The Times of Israel, 2024); and even though the Houthis closed an important maritime trade route and seemingly harmed Chinese interests, China did not seem overly active in stopping their actions. Overall, China acted in a way that positioned it as supporting the political approach of the Arab countries that mainly wanted to end the war. China is also expected to view itself as harmed by the expansion of the Abraham Accords and to increase its support of Iran as a way of balancing this trend, while also striving to create a security architecture in the Middle East (“common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security”) that integrates Iran, makes the role of the U.S. redundant, and pushes it out of the region (Sun, 2024).

Overall, both powers saw the war as a way to promote their approach and their interests in the Middle East, and it is not currently possible to assess which of the two will eventually improve its position in the aftermath of the war.

Nonetheless, Trump’s return to the White House, and his distinct desire to reduce American military involvement in the Middle East, could undermine the ability of countries in the Middle East to rely on the United States in terms of security, and expose them to U.S. pressure in economic and security contexts. At the same time, China can be expected to continue to expand its economic ties in the Middle East, such as through cooperative efforts in the development and production of electric vehicles (Saudi Arabia and Egypt). It is therefore difficult to determine whether the U.S. and China’s conduct during the war will fundamentally change the longstanding trends of their involvement and influence in the Middle East, especially in light of the high uncertainty added by President Trump, who on the one hand is courting Gulf and Saudi investments in the United States, and on the other hand consistently strives to reduce American security involvement in the region.

Recommendations

Based on this above analysis, it appears preferable for Israel to find a way to maintain and enhance **its strategic alliance with the United States, and to maintain positive and constructive relations with China**. Still, **Israel must recognize that there is no substitute for its strategic alliance with the United States:**

1. There is no substitute for the strategic support which the U.S. provides to Israel against international pressures. American aid provides a considerable share of the military force buildup budget, the IDF almost exclusively uses American aerial battle platforms and munitions or produces Israeli ground battle platforms in collaboration with American manufacturers. In addition, the image of strong Israeli ties with Washington serves as a “diplomatic force multiplier” for Israel and as a source of power in the regional and international arena. The U.S. is also Israel’s top trading partner. The strength of the bilateral relations was on full display during the Swords of Iron War, when the United States supported Israel politically, deployed American forces to intercept threats to Israel, and threatened Hezbollah and Iran against expanding the war at its outset.
2. **Israel must recognize the deep change underway in the United States regarding China** and the fact that the issue is one of rare American bipartisan consensus. Should Israel fail to meet Washington’s expectations for adjustments in its China policy (such as during the end of the first Trump Administration and the beginning of the Biden Administration), or become embroiled in a confrontation with the United States regarding China—**an issue that lies at the core of U.S. national security**—Israel may encounter a harsh, sustained negative response; experience long-term cracks in the bilateral relationship; and provide an opening for those who seek to do harm to the U.S.-Israel relationship.

However, the importance of the strategic relationship with Washington does not necessarily require alienating Beijing, due, among other things, to the latter's rising influence in the international arena, its ability to do damage to Israel directly and indirectly, and **China's role in the Middle East, which is expected to grow**, with increasing influence on a variety of countries and processes in the region. In light of these trends, as well as China's importance to Israel as a trading partner, it is preferable that Israel has open and constructive lines of communication with Beijing. Still, it also appears to be necessary to recognize the fact that China was the one who chose to worsen its relations with Israel during the war, as part of its overarching desire to smear the United States, and that the ability to maintain a constructive relationship with Beijing was hampered as a result.

Although many countries in the Middle East (such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey) are jockeying for a flexible position in between the two powers (a hedging strategy) and trying to leverage it into strategic gains, especially vis-à-vis the United States, such a strategy would be ill advised for Israel. Flirting with China will most probably not result in meaningful gains for Israel from the U.S. or China, but rather could increase the erosion of its special relationship with the United States.

Therefore, **Israel should attempt to find a "U.S. favored middle ground policy" in conducting itself between the powers.** This position should be characterized by the **strengthening of strategic relations with the United States, in addition to fruitful, de-risked, and better controlled economic relations with China.** The policy should be based on the following principles:

1. **Understanding and acknowledging the (changing and evolving) red lines of the world powers.** For the United States these are primarily the transfer of military or dual-use technology to China

(either intentionally or due to negligence), allowing China to have significant physical or technological access in Israel, and the absence of effective controls on Chinese activity in the country (although it can be assumed that American demands of Israel will be broader than only these red lines). From China's perspective, the expectation is for the continuation of a good economic relationship (including investments in various realms of infrastructure, albeit on a more limited scale) and refraining from measures (concrete or declarative) that are perceived by China as provocative or directed against it.

2. One major aspect of the new policy, should be an in-depth analysis of the preferred way to develop Israel's economic relations with China, in the age of great power competition. As the technological-economic battlefield between the powers becomes more clear (though dynamic), Israel can understand which are the less sensitive technological areas and focus on them to further develop Israel-China relations (agro-tech, for example).
3. **The designation of an inter-governmental body responsible for developing policy regarding China and implementing it vis-à-vis the public, the public and private sector, and provide it with the ability to issue guidance to the different relevant agencies and regulators.** The current situation, in which different regulators and stakeholders can adopt diverging policies and guidelines regarding Chinese involvement, is untenable and requires overarching policy guidelines to produce a coherent and sustainable policy.
4. **Regular engagement at the political and professional-bureaucratic level on the status of the great-power competition.** This would require continuous information-gathering and analysis of the subject, deeper cultural and strategic understanding, and the creation of a regularly updated

knowledge base for decision makers. Leading this mission should be a senior level official, with authority and responsibility in the matter. It is also desirable to establish direct, ongoing dialogue on the subject of great power competition with the United States on various channels (policy, intelligence, economic channels) to improve the situational awareness and decision-making processes. It would also be prudent to establish professional channels for ongoing discussion with Chinese officials and other Chinese elements (such as academia).

5. **Israel should seek to Integrate itself into the United States' initiatives to increase the resilience of supply chains, especially in the tech sector.** Israel has an opportunity to show that it is a valuable and active partner in the initiatives and in technological cooperation that the United States is promoting as part of its strategic competition with China. This could enhance Israel's political, economic, and technological value to the U.S., and provide some stability to the current turbulence in special relationship between Israel and the United States.
6. Still, **there is no certainty that the strategy of finding a "U.S. favored middle ground" would be tenable over time.** The dynamism of the competition between the powers could make it difficult to remain between the two, and a crisis between the powers (for example, surrounding Taiwan) could force Israel to choose a side. In this situation, **the default is to take the side of its strategic ally, the United States** (to the degree possible, concurrently with developing trade relations with China), as any other choice could come

at a high price in terms of Israeli national security.

7. **It is essential to strengthen the system for controlling exports and screening foreign investments in Israel**, primarily in realms not under the direct responsibility of the Israeli Defense Ministry (which has various ways of preventing mistakes in the security realm). Should Israel's policies of export controls vis-à-vis China be viewed in Washington as partial and not taking into account U.S. concerns, there could be negative repercussions for Israel's image in any administration.
8. It is advisable to promote unofficial dialogue (such as Track 2) with Americans (academics and government) to **better understand the United States' expectations of Israel**, America's red lines, and the ways Israel could be valuable to the U.S. in the context of great-power competition. A similar dialogue with Chinese partners would also be advised to gain better insight into Chinese attitude to the competition, and also with European and international actors in order to learn about different approaches to China and about the diverse perceptions of, and responses to, the competition.

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Appendix: Main Realms of Technology from a U.S. Perspective

The United States regards various technologies as sensitive and important for its strategic competition with China. The specific technologies that are viewed that way, changes over time depending on the bodies responsible for assessing it. Thus, we can find different lists of sensitive technologies produced by the different bodies dealing with the issue.

The most focused list of security-related technologies was published as part of the National Defensive Strategy and includes the following realms:

1. Advancement in the realm of weaponry, including weapons against targets in space (counterspace weapons), hypersonic weapons, advanced chemical and biological weapons, and new emerging capabilities in the realm of delivery systems and payload.
2. New uses for AI, quantum science, autonomous systems, biotechnology, and space science (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

An extensive list of emerging technologies was compiled by the U.S. Department of Commerce, in accordance with the requirements of two laws enacted in 2018—the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA) and the Export Control Reform Act (ECRA). The list contains 14 technological families (some of which received more extensive detailing of sub-technologies) (Rafaelof, 2021; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022):

1. **Biotechnology**, including nanobiology, synthetic biology, genome and genetic engineering, neurotech.
2. **Artificial intelligence and machine learning** technologies, including:
 - Neural networks and deep learning (brain modelling, time series prediction, and classification).
 - Evolution and genetic computation (genetic algorithms and genetic programming).
 - Reinforcement learning.
 - Computer vision (object recognition and image understanding).
 - Expert systems (decision support systems and teaching systems).
 - Speech and audio processing (speech recognition and production).
 - Natural language processing (machine translation).
 - Planning (scheduling and game playing).
 - Audio and video manipulation technologies (voice cloning and deepfakes).
 - AI cloud technologies
 - AI chipsets
3. **Chip** technology, including systems-on-chip (SoC) and Stacked Memory on Chip.
4. **Position, navigation, and timing** technology.
5. Technology related to the **hyper-sonic realm**, including algorithms for flight control, propulsion technologies, thermal protection systems, and specialized materials.
6. **Advanced computer systems**, including memory-centric logic.
7. **Data analysis** technology, such as visualization, automated analysis algorithms, and context-aware computing.
8. **Brain-computer interface**, including neural-controlled interfaces, mind-machine interfaces, direct-neural interfaces, and brain-machine interfaces.
9. **Quantum technology** – Quantum computing, quantum cryptography, and quantum sensing.

10. **Robotics**, including microdrones and microrobots, swarming technology, self-assembling robots, molecular robotics, robot compilers, and smart dust.
11. **Technology in the realm of logistics** – mobile electric power, model and simulation, total asset visibility, and distribution-based logistics systems.
12. **Advanced materials** – Adaptive camouflage, functional textiles, and biomaterials.
13. **Manufacturing technology** – Additive manufacturing.
14. **Advanced surveillance technology** – Such as faceprint and voiceprint technologies.

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Notes

- 1 Special investigations conducted by the Commerce Department for the purpose of examining the influence of imports on national security. During the tenure of the Trump Administration, numerous investigations were conducted in this area (for the first time since 2001) as part of the attempt to strengthen local production, regardless of China (Bureau of Industry and Security, n.d.).



China-US-Taiwan Relations Since 2016: Great Power Competition, Oppositional Policies, and Threat Diplomacy

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Taiwan—with the complicated and charged relationships surrounding it—is considered one of the most prominent areas of contention in the global arena. As the competition or rivalry between the two main global superpowers, the United States and China, escalates in the Asian or Indo-Pacific region, the tension surrounding the Taiwan issue heightens, the rhetoric intensifies, and the parties' actions create a new status quo that at any moment threatens to give way to actual warfare. This article examines the development of the trilateral China-Taiwan-US relationship since the Democratic Progressive Party's return to power in Taiwan in 2016, the ways this relationship has deteriorated during this period, and the possible reasons for this. The article focuses on the processes that took place from the visit of Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi's to Taiwan in August 2022 until a new president took office in Taiwan in May 2024—President Lai, also from the DPP. These processes are referred to as the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, which is ongoing.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, United States, Taiwan Strait Crisis, Communist Party, Kuomintang, DPP

Introduction

The year 2016 was characterized by the culmination of several processes, both internal to China, Taiwan, and the United States and at the global level, which changed the course of the trilateral relationship. First, in the United States and Taiwan, it was a presidential election year—at the beginning of the year in Taiwan and toward the end of the year in the United States. The Chinese issue played an important part in both: in Taiwan, on the question of defining its relations with China, and in the United States, as a target of attacks for candidates. At that time,

China's reigning president, Xi Jinping, was in the middle of his first term. He succeeded in strengthening his grip on the party and was defined that year as a “core leader” (领导核心) of China (like Mao, Deng, and Jiang before him). In the first half of his term, China displayed increasing aggressiveness in the global arena, especially in its immediate environs: the East China Sea (in the dispute with Japan over the issue of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands), in the South China Sea, and in Central Asia, including through the Belt and Road Initiative (or One

Belt One Road, as it was defined in the initial stages, starting in 2013). This policy was linked to President Xi's broader vision of "realizing China's dream of the great national revival of the Chinese people" (实现中华民族伟大复兴中国梦); to the idea of the "new era" (新时代) expressing the worldview of the Communist Party of China in recent years (especially since 2017); and to "Xi Jinping's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) more broadly (China Daily, 2017). Together these three elements were intended to further a paradigm shift in the history of modern China and the world as a whole: a qualitative and quantitative change in China's successes and a change in China's global standing, assuming the central and dominant place—that it believes it deserves—on the world stage, since President Xi Jinping's rise to power (Dai & Luqiu, 2022; Holbig, 2018; Insisa, 2021; Wei et. al., 2023).¹ China's relationships with its close neighbors were supposed to change accordingly and to express China's new dominance.

The Taiwanese political system was in turmoil ahead of the 2016 elections. The two main parties in contention then (and now) were the Kuomintang (the "nation's party" or KMT) and the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party). The main disagreements between them centered on a variety of internal and external issues. In domestic and economic policy, the DPP had more of a left-wing, socialist tendency, a more liberal approach toward social issues (such as same-sex marriage) and a more lenient constitutional approach that focuses on rehabilitating criminals rather than punishment. In contrast, the Kuomintang has been considered more conservative, favoring a freer and more capitalist economy with less taxation. More importantly for our purposes, the Kuomintang, certainly during its years in power until 2016, accepted the One China principle or policy in accordance with the 1992 Consensus with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and sought to strengthen connections with the

PRC. The DPP, in contrast, advocates a distinct Taiwanese identity, decentralizing economic relations and reducing dependence on the PRC, and the idea, intentionally presented somewhat vaguely, that Taiwan has been a sovereign state for some time (so there is no need to declare "independence"). In addition to these two parties, the TPP (Taiwan People's Party) emerged in 2019. It is ideologically closer to the Kuomintang but presents itself as more pragmatic. Given that the public sees it as detached from the Kuomintang's historic connection to the decades of dictatorial and sometimes violent rule, this gives it a certain advantage over the Kuomintang, but during the 2016 elections, the TPP had not yet been established.

The "sunflower protests," which reached a climax in 2014, strongly criticized the Kuomintang's conciliatory policy toward the PRC. It became a significant political force, and in the January 2016 elections, the DPP won a majority in the legislature as well as the presidency, and Tsai Ing-wen became president of Taiwan. It appeared that the question of Taiwanese "independence" was back on the table, although officially, before the elections, the DPP declared that it was not addressing it. Shortly before the elections, in November 2015, China's president and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou met in Singapore after a series of official meetings in China and Taiwan between senior officials from China's Taiwan Affairs Office and Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council in 2014 (which were preceded by an unofficial meeting between them in Bali in 2013). It appeared that relations between the two countries could progress along a positive trajectory. This only reinforced the significance of the Kuomintang's fall and the DPP's subsequent rise (Insisa, 2016). During Barack Obama's final year as U.S. president, efforts to establish the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) succeeded.² On one hand, it seemed that the United States was intensifying its attempts to confront China as part of the *Pivot to Asia* (President Obama's policy, mainly

from 2011, of transferring the center of gravity of American foreign policy to Asia). Yet on the other hand, China was very displeased with this and would likely thus strengthen its attempts to confront these actions (deLisle, 2018; Tsai & Liu, 2017). So while it seemed that the relationship between China and Taiwan was improving, despite various challenges, the year 2016 was a watershed on this issue, and in certain senses, the relationship began to deteriorate from that point on. In this article, I seek to examine the dynamics of China-Taiwan-US relations since 2016 and to explain the reasons for these dynamics, to assess elements of continuity after this year, and identify the main trends in these relations, particularly from 2022 (the beginning of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis) until Taiwanese President William Lai, also from the DPP, took office in May 2024.

The Taiwanese DPP in turn also aspired to strengthen relations with the United States while emphasizing shared values, democracy, and more, further widening the gap between the PRC and Taiwan

Continuity and Change Since May 2016

In December 2016, a symbolic event marked a shift in the trilateral relationship. President Tsai called President-elect Trump to congratulate him. For over three decades, the presidents of the United States and Taiwan had not spoken, certainly not officially, but Donald Trump received the call, and the two reportedly spoke for about ten minutes. Intentionally or not, this phone call signaled to the PRC that a new era may have begun in which the One China policy is no longer accepted. The Obama administration made sure to declare immediately afterward that the United States was continuing the One China policy, and the response from China was quite tepid and mainly blamed Taiwan for the “ruse,” but the phone call’s symbolism was not

lost on any of them (deLisle, 2018), and it was not just symbolic. For example, in Obama’s second term, there were almost no US arms sales to Taiwan (except in 2015), but already in the first year of Trump’s presidency, the arms deals between the countries were renewed and even increased (Dickey, 2019).³

Furthermore, the general worsening of relations between the United States and China, with the relationship defined as “strategic competition” at the end of 2017, and the “trade war” that arrived soon afterward, were not, of course, confined to the bilateral sphere; they had global implications, including on Taiwan. Thus, the more the United States emphasized its shared values with democratic countries and stressed the problematic nature of the PRC’s form of government, with an emphasis on the CCP (the Chinese Communist Party), so calls in the United States to strengthen its relations with Taiwan in order to firmly stand up to China grew. The Taiwanese DPP in turn also aspired to strengthen relations with the United States while emphasizing shared values, democracy, and more, further widening the gap between the PRC and Taiwan (Insisa, 2021).

Official relations between the PRC and Taiwan hit a snag again, although, as in the past, their economic relations continued to advance and even reached new heights. Taiwanese public support for the DPP and President Tsai decreased, irrespective of the Chinese issue, due to internal issues and especially because the economic situation had not improved as they had hoped. As the president’s four-year term progressed, the polls in Taiwan indicated a return to support for the Kuomintang. But throughout 2019, in the lead-up to the January 2020 elections in Taiwan, this trend changed and support for the president returned, in no small part due to events related to the PRC. During this period, a huge wave of protests arose in Hong Kong, triggered by a new extradition law being discussed (which allowed Hong Kong citizens to be quickly and easily extradited to mainland China), along with closer judicial

cooperation. However, the protests were based on deeper reasons than the law itself (which was not ultimately passed at that time), in particular the weakening of the fundamental separation between the legal systems of China and Hong Kong, as well as the democratic system of Hong Kong in general—a trend that began years before.

This point, along with the growing protests and their violent suppression, demonstrated to Taiwan (and others) that the solution reached on the Hong Kong issue—“one country, two systems” (一国两制)—is unworkable. This solution, which began in practice after the UK handed Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997, was sometimes seen as a model that might also enable Taiwan to peacefully integrate within the framework of the PRC: one country (the PRC), in which different governmental, economic, and legislative systems can live side by side—mainland China, and beside it (that is, under it) “special administrative regions” (SAR) with different systems. China’s forceful actions in Hong Kong and its offensive diplomacy (which came to be called “wolf warrior diplomacy”) convinced the Taiwanese that such a system is not a legitimate option for them and prompted them to protest in solidarity with Hong Kong’s residents. Taiwan’s president leveraged this and rode the wave of protests to a second term in 2020, while the Kuomintang—which over time had sought to promote relations with the PRC—had difficulty responding to the protesters’ claims (Brown & Churchman, 2019; Insisa, 2019).

While it is obvious that the primary issue on the agenda is “unification” (统一, or “reunification”), it is important to understand the main controversies included under this general title, especially since 2016. On the part of the PRC, several primary demands are seen or presented as conditions:

a. Taiwanese acceptance of the 1992 Consensus (九二共识), which includes the One China principle;

b. The demand for Taiwan’s complete rejection of the idea of “Taiwanese independence” (台独);

c. Taiwanese acceptance of the principle of “one country, two systems” as the necessary action basis for unification;

d. A rejection of any “external influence or involvement” (外部势力干涉) in their relations, referring first and foremost to American involvement, of course.

In this context, Taiwan’s conduct under President Tsai has been ambiguous: The president accepted the “historic fact” that there were discussions in 1992, but not the consensus (on the One China principle) as China presents it, and took from the 1992 understandings mainly the idea of continued discussions in the spirit of peace and good will. While she has not spoken unequivocally of Taiwanese independence, the President has claimed the separate existence of Taiwan and repeatedly emphasized its democratic system, which is fundamentally different from the Chinese system, and thus also the assumption that any decision on Taiwan’s fate would be in the hands of the Taiwanese people. The principle of “one country, two systems” was rejected, certainly after 2019; and Taiwan under Tsai also sought to strengthen its relations with the United States (and with other “like-minded” democratic countries), as well as to strengthen Taiwan’s international standing, for example through participation in a variety of international institutions (Insisa, 2019). Hence, not only has the question of unification remained unanswered, the very ability to engage in negotiations or discussions about the future of relations has faded, while in China, voices claiming that Taiwan is striving for “independence,” “cultural separation” (文化去中), “economic distancing” (经济排中), “diplomatic opposition” (外交抗中), and “the use of democracy to repel China” (民主拒中) have grown louder, prompting claims that the use of military force is the only way to implement unification (Zhao, 2023).

Figure 1. ADIZ overlaps in East Asia

Source: Ebbighausen, 2021

Moreover, in parallel with President Tsai and her party coming to power, since 2016, not only has the PRC escalated its tone toward Taiwan, it has also held military exercises close to the island almost every year. A significant portion of them began after “provocations,” in the PRC’s view, by Taiwan or its ally, the United States. A few days after Tsai was elected president in January 2016, the Chinese military held live firing drills and also mock landing exercises to practice taking over “some” island. The new president’s inauguration was also accompanied by Chinese military exercises in the sector close to Taiwan, sending a clear

message to the new president and Taiwan as a whole (Denyer, 2016). In addition, during Tsai’s first term, the PRC continued to increase its military presence (mainly the navy and air force) in both the East China Sea around Taiwan and the South China Sea (south of Taiwan) and increased its sorties and demands in the sector of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands north of Taiwan— islands controlled by Japan but claimed by both the PRC and Taiwan (Xin, 2020). The fact that President Tsai visited the United States several times during her first term (until the COVID-19 pandemic) did not help ease the tensions either.

With respect to the PRC's air sorties, it is important to remember that at the end of 2013, China unilaterally declared a new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. This occurred after a worsening of the territorial dispute between China and Japan (primarily but not only) about sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and the new ADIZ created a dangerous overlap between the ADIZs of China, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea (Trent, 2020).⁴ Gradually, and especially since 2016, China increased its air operations in the new area. Thus, in 2016 and 2017, it seemed that most of China's military activity in the maritime and air sector focused mainly on the South China Sea (largely due to the discussions and later decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favor of the Philippines in its conflict with China there) and around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. But China's air operations in the area close to Taiwan also increased, especially flights by H-6K strategic bombers, which were greatly augmented, including encircling the island in an unprecedented manner. These encirclements, which came to be called "island encirclement patrols" (绕岛巡航) in 2017 in reference to the encirclement flights around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, also entered the 2019 white paper for China's National Defense in the New Era (新时代的中国国防), and were described as part of China's readiness to "protect the country's unity" (捍卫国家统一) at sea and in the air and as "a serious warning to the divisive 'Taiwan independence' forces" (对“台独”分裂势力发出严正警告) (Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi, 2019). On several occasions, the bombers were accompanied by airborne warnings and control, electronic warfare, anti-submarine, and intelligence gathering aircrafts—various models of Tupolev 154, KJ-500, Y-8, and Y-9; by aerial refueling aircrafts; and by fighters such as the J-10, J-11, or Sukhoi-30 (Grossman et al., 2018; Trent, 2020).

Taiwan responded with military drills of its own, while the United States increased its defense budget for US Navy visits to Taiwan.

The increase in Chinese flights around Taiwan in the summer of 2017 may be connected to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which was held in October of that year—a central event in Chinese politics. In this case, Xi Jinping's term as the party's General Secretary was about to be extended by five years, so demonstrating a strong stance and assertiveness in the Taiwanese sector were seen as strengthening his position. In addition, this conduct may also be connected to the comprehensive reform conducted in the Chinese military in 2015 and 2016, and the desire or need of the new branches and commands to conduct training and demonstrate operational readiness (Wuthnow, 2017).

However, in the 2010s, the vast majority of Chinese incursions into ADIZs in East Asia were clearly and overwhelmingly into Japan's air identification zone. According to estimates, in that decade Chinese Air Force aircraft penetrated the Japanese zone more than 3,000 times and into the South Korean Zone (starting in 2016) more than 300 times. Despite the air exercises around Taiwan, along with extensive exercises by the Chinese Navy (and a change to a civilian airway so that it passed closer to the median line), only in 2019 did Chinese Air Force aircraft begin to consistently enter the Taiwanese ADIZ, and these incursions became slightly more frequent. But more concerning from the Taiwanese and American perspective was that at this stage, several flights (mainly of fighters such as J-11 and later J-16) intentionally crossed the strait's median line for the first time in decades, with Chinese officials denying the existence of such a line (Trent, 2020).

Ahead of the Taiwanese presidential elections in January 2020, the frequency of the flights increased, and after Tsai's re-election, incursions by Chinese aircraft became increasingly routine. Chinese Navy ships also penetrated Taiwan's maritime zone, including what appeared to be a show of force by Chinese aircraft carriers, and on more than one occasion, "militias" of Chinese civilian "fishing boats" have

Figure 2. Air incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ by the Chinese military

Source: Brown & Lewis, n.d.

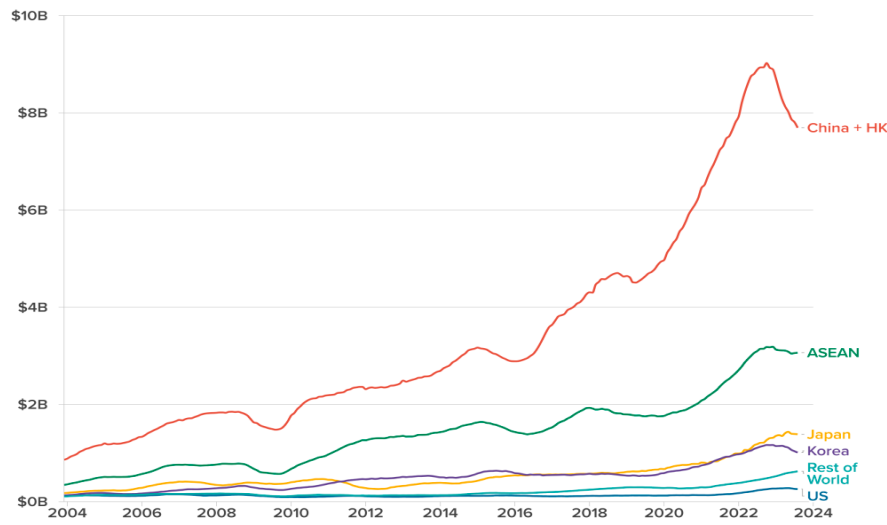
Thus, the old status quo surrounding Taiwan has changed dramatically, especially since the end of 2020, and a new status quo has emerged in which sorties, aircraft incursions, median line crossings, and increased Chinese maritime activity (military and civilian) have become routine.

also demonstrated heightened activity around Taiwan (Dobias, 2024). Not only have Taiwan's elections led to increased incursions, mainly into the ADIZ but sometimes also crossing the median line; but visits by American officials such as Alex Azar (US Secretary of Health and Human Services) in August 2020 and Under Secretary of State Keith Krach in September 2020, plus multiplying arms deals that the United States continued to approve for Taiwan, also served as a reason or an excuse for such sorties. Thus, the old status quo surrounding Taiwan has changed dramatically, especially since the end of 2020, and a new status quo has emerged in which sorties, aircraft incursions, median line crossings, and increased Chinese maritime activity (military and civilian) have become routine (Ebbighausen, 2021).

Part of the explanation for the increase in China's threat policy is also related to the United States' growing involvement in the Indo-Pacific region: reviving the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad: the United States, Japan, India, and Australia) starting in 2017, but with greater intensity during the Biden administration; the military alliance between the United States, the UK, and Australia (AUKUS) in 2021 (with recent rounds of talks on adding Japan and South Korea); and the attempt to establish a significant economic alliance (IPEF) in 2022, which is still in the process of being formed (Koga, 2024).⁵ All of these, in addition to increasing American involvement in the Philippines, have contributed to a sense within the PRC of being under siege. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, which initially seemed like it might help improve relations (through medical cooperation) between the PRC and Taiwan, also ultimately strained cross-strait relations. While Taiwanese medical staff and researchers were among the first permitted to come to Wuhan right at the beginning of the pandemic, Taiwan's tremendous success during the pandemic (fewer than ten died of COVID-19) and its loud (and accurate) voice at

Figure 3. Volume of semiconductor exports from Taiwan by country/region

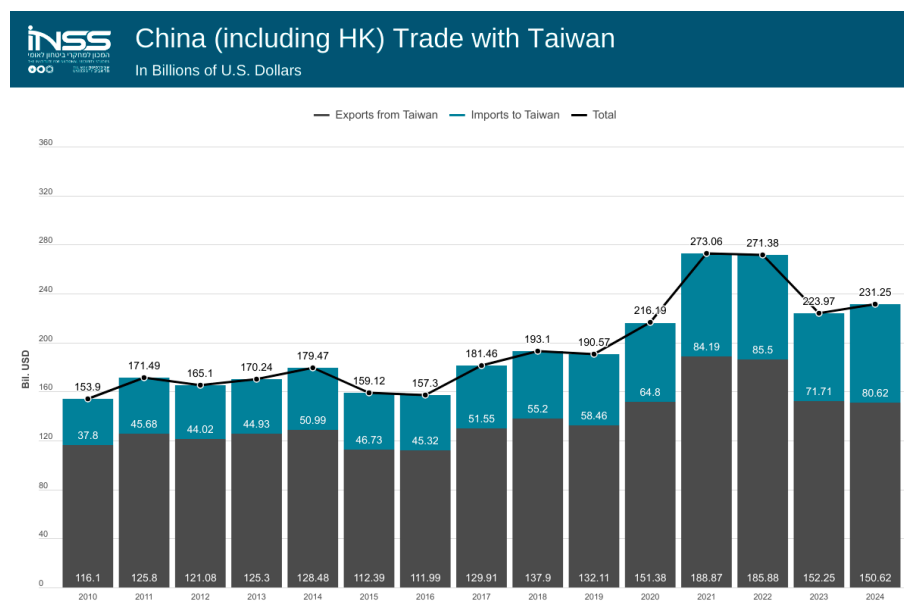
Taiwan Semiconductor Exports by Country
12-month rolling average



Source: Taiwan Customs Administration, author's calculations

Source: [Atlantic Council](#) (Mark & Graham, 2023)

Figure 4. Trade between Taiwan and China (including Hong Kong) according to Taiwan customs data



Data from: [Mainland Affairs Council](#), [Ministry of Finance, Republic of China](#)

the World Health Organization led the PRC to see it as a competitor in public opinion, and Taiwan itself to seek more of a presence in the world arena and international organizations, with greater international legitimacy (Cabestan, 2022; Zhang & Savage, 2020).

Despite all these tensions, during Tsai Ing-wen's terms, the volume of trade between China and Taiwan grew dramatically. The volume of Taiwanese exports to China is four times that of imports from China, with semiconductors as the "star" of Taiwanese exports. Investment,

especially by Taiwan in China, also grew dramatically during this period (although it somewhat declined in more recent years). In other words, in the past eight years, we have witnessed two opposing trends: on one hand, an intensification of the harsh rhetoric across the strait and of related military measures, with economic, cyber, and security threats from the Chinese side; and on the other hand, the strengthening of economic and business relations between the two sides (Liu, 2022). For years, before the COVID-19 pandemic, it seemed that tourism and cultural relations were also improving. The strengthening of relations was also accompanied by the question of Taiwanese (and, to a certain extent, Chinese) dependence created by these relations (Mark & Graham, 2023). However, almost three years of a zero-COVID policy in China, and a certain tendency toward detachment from the outside world, ultimately reversed this trend—at least for now.

Another issue that has significantly increased tensions surrounding Taiwan since 2022 is the war in Ukraine. Immediately after the Russian invasion, an increasing number of voices began suggesting that the PRC sees the war in Ukraine as a kind of trial run ahead of a near-future campaign against Taiwan, that China is assessing not only the military aspects of the campaign but also the ways in which the world responds to it, and that China would “exploit” the global attention on Ukraine to pursue military action against Taiwan (Köckritz, 2023). So far, these forecasts have proven wrong. China, of course, has assessed and is assessing this campaign in the Taiwanese context too, but it is very important to China to differentiate Ukraine entirely from Taiwan (more on this below). Also, Russia’s failure to succeed in Ukraine may have discouraged China from similar activity, together with a lack of desire to invade Taiwan thus far, regardless of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, during the fighting and perhaps due to the loud and concerned voices regarding Taiwan, then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi decided to visit the island.

And Then Pelosi Came

Pelosi’s visit was the highest-ranking American visit since Newt Gingrich’s visit to the island about 25 years earlier, in 1997. He was the speaker of the US House of Representatives, and he came to the island shortly after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-1996). While the Biden administration expressed discomfort about the timing of Pelosi’s visit, it claimed it did not have the authority to prohibit such a trip. And while the administration simultaneously claimed that the visit did not signify a change in American policy—that is, the United States continues to maintain the One China policy—the PRC did not accept this. It is important to analyze the visit at the beginning of August 2022 both based on developments in the international arena and against the backdrop of domestical political conditions, particularly in China and the United States.

First, from the beginning of Joe Biden’s presidency, he emphasized the Indo-Pacific region—from America’s West Coast to East Africa—as a strategic zone of high priority for the United States. In February 2022, shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the American Indo-Pacific Strategy was published (The White House, 2022a, p.2). It opens by quoting the president’s speech a few months earlier: “The future of each of our nations—and indeed the world—depends upon a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead.”

The concept mentioned in this quote, a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), developed over the years and was promoted especially by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, particularly in light of China’s increasing dominance in the region. This concept has also been the basis for the development of the Quad in recent years. In the strategy itself, China is explicitly mentioned as a rogue actor, linking the Taiwan issue to the border disputes between China and India and other problematic elements of China’s foreign relations—including tensions with Australia (The White House, 2022a, p. 5):

The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific. From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behavior. In the process, the PRC is also undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that have brought stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, the strategy sketches the United States' main commitments on the Taiwanese issue. Along with the usual statements that the United States continues to adhere to the One China policy, it appears that much of the language aligns with Taiwan's preferences. In this document, the United States advocates supporting Taiwan, including its military capabilities (for self-defense, of course), all according to the preferences and desires of the "Taiwanese people" (The White House, 2022a, p. 13):

We will also work with partners inside and outside the region to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, including by supporting Taiwan's self-defense capabilities, to ensure an environment in which Taiwan's future is determined peacefully in accordance with the wishes and best interests of Taiwan's people. In doing so, our approach remains consistent with our One-China policy and our

longstanding commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances.

When President Biden was asked in Tokyo whether the United States would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan, he responded in the affirmative. This response by the president, not for the first time and not for the last time, contradicted the United States' official policy, the "policy of ambiguity," according to which the United States does not declare whether it would intervene militarily or not in such a case.

This is while declaring that the United States will protect its own interests, including in the Taiwan Strait, and that it will also promote security in the region in a variety of ways, both militarily and industrially (p. 15). In May of that year, President Biden visited Asia (South Korea and Japan). During the visit, in addition to attempting to strengthen the United States' strategic relations with the countries he visited (with China always in the background), a meeting of the Quad was held (with South Korea expressing an interest in joining the quadrilateral dialogue), and the IPEF was launched. Furthermore, when President Biden was asked in Tokyo whether the United States would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan, he responded in the affirmative. This response by the president, not for the first time and not for the last time, contradicted the United States' official policy, the "policy of ambiguity," according to which the United States does not declare whether it would intervene militarily or not in such a case. Official spokespeople and the president claimed that there was no change in US policy on the Taiwan issue and tried to downplay the unequivocal statements. But from China's perspective, the statements, along with actions on the ground, certainly indicated a change. The change did not begin in 2022 but years prior, as clarified below. The changes in Japanese defense policy, which were also part

of the discussions and declarations in Biden's visit, with Japan significantly increasing its defense budget (and the areas of investment), the continued American commitment to support Japan's defense, and all this in the context of Taiwan—all of these contributed to a sense of change from China's perspective (Aum et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2022).

In contrast, we can observe consistency in China's declarations. The July 2019 white paper—China's National Defense in the New Era—repeats elements published in the 2005 law on Taiwan regarding China's territorial integrity, the One China principle, the desire for “peaceful unification,” and alternatively, the fact that China has not abandoned the option of the use of force. However, most of the discussion surrounding Taiwan in the 2019 document relates to the DPP party, which is presented as separatist and promoting “Taiwanese independence,” as well as the involvement of “external forces” that are destabilizing the region (Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi, 2019).

In August 2022, immediately after Pelosi's visit, China published another white paper, this time one that focused entirely on the Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era (台湾问题与新时代中国统一事业) (Guowuyuan, 2022). Like its predecessors, this document emphasizes that Taiwan is an integral part of the Chinese homeland, that the CCP is taking concrete steps to bring about unification—which they describe as an inevitable process—and that the chances of peaceful unification are actually quite high. The document also presents the DPP and the “external forces” as the instigators of the tension in the region and as those harming peaceful unification (and peace in general) and emphasizes that “the divisiveness of ‘Taiwan independence’ and the plots of external forces must be resolutely crushed” (坚决粉碎“台独”分裂和外来干涉图谋). The document also emphasizes the full commitment of China and the CCP to bringing about the unification, which is presented as a unification of families, as an

integral part of China's “national rejuvenation,” as a core national interest, and as one of China's decisive processes at this time—that is, in the “new era”—as it is the inevitable result of a “5,000 year” historical process.

The document also notes that despite the DPP's actions against China and against unification, China has reportedly continued to strengthen ties with Taiwan since 2016. In particular, it highlights the increased economic relations between the PRC and Taiwan in recent decades. At the same time, the document also recognizes the differences that exist between the PRC and Taiwan, for example, socially. It therefore presents the solution of “One Country, Two Systems” (supposedly the solution in Hong Kong) as a feasible and desirable solution. Like its predecessors, this document does not take the option of using force off the table, although it defines its potential use as not against “our compatriots” across the strait, but against separatists and external forces (Guowuyuan, 2022).

Despite the consistency of the “peace-seeking” approach in the documents, in the period between the publishing of the 2019 and 2022 documents the situation on the ground (or rather, in the air) escalated, and, as mentioned above, the incursions into Taiwanese airspace by Chinese aircraft and the various exercises conducted by the Chinese military only increased. Concurrent with the press releases made in Tokyo at the end of May 2022 during President Biden's visit to Asia, China and Russia conducted an unusual joint air exercise with the participation of strategic bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. While they have held many exercises over the years, of course, this one was the first of its kind since the onset of the war in Ukraine, and its execution at a time when the US president was in Japan—whether or not the exercise was planned long in advance—was intended to send a strong message to the United States and its partners: China and its partner Russia will not stand idly by (Bana, 2022; Kennedy

et al., 2022). In effect, the more the United States strengthened its alliances in East Asia, it appears to have become clear how few such alliances China itself has. And perhaps, given China's "alliance deficiency," it became clear to what extent Russia, however weak, has become increasingly important to China, even if China is ultimately far more important to Russia.

Meanwhile, in the last few years, especially since 2020, and increasing significantly since the middle of 2022, the "trade war" between China and the United States has focused more and more on technology, specifically on semiconductors—"chips" (Brundage, 2023). In addition to the various sanctions, duties, and restrictions that began at the end of Trump's first term, measures to strengthen the production system and supply chain in this context were introduced at the end of 2021 and in 2022. These efforts were aimed both within the United States and as part of a process of creating technological alliances, especially with countries in East Asia: Japan, South Korea, and, of course, the world chip leader—Taiwan. These actions not only constrained China in this field (with implications for almost every production industry) but were also seen by China as an attempt to forge an anti-Chinese coalition in which Taiwan plays an important role. Thus, an initiative called the TTIC (U.S.-Taiwan Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration) was launched by December 2021, and it continued to gain momentum in 2022 (Keegan & Churchman, 2023). However, it is important to note that as the United States increases the production of chips within its borders or with allies that are not Taiwan, and as the leading chip producers in Taiwan, chiefly TSMC, start to transfer some of their activity outside of Taiwan, this could weaken the idea of the "silicon shield" (Eckl, 2021).⁸⁶

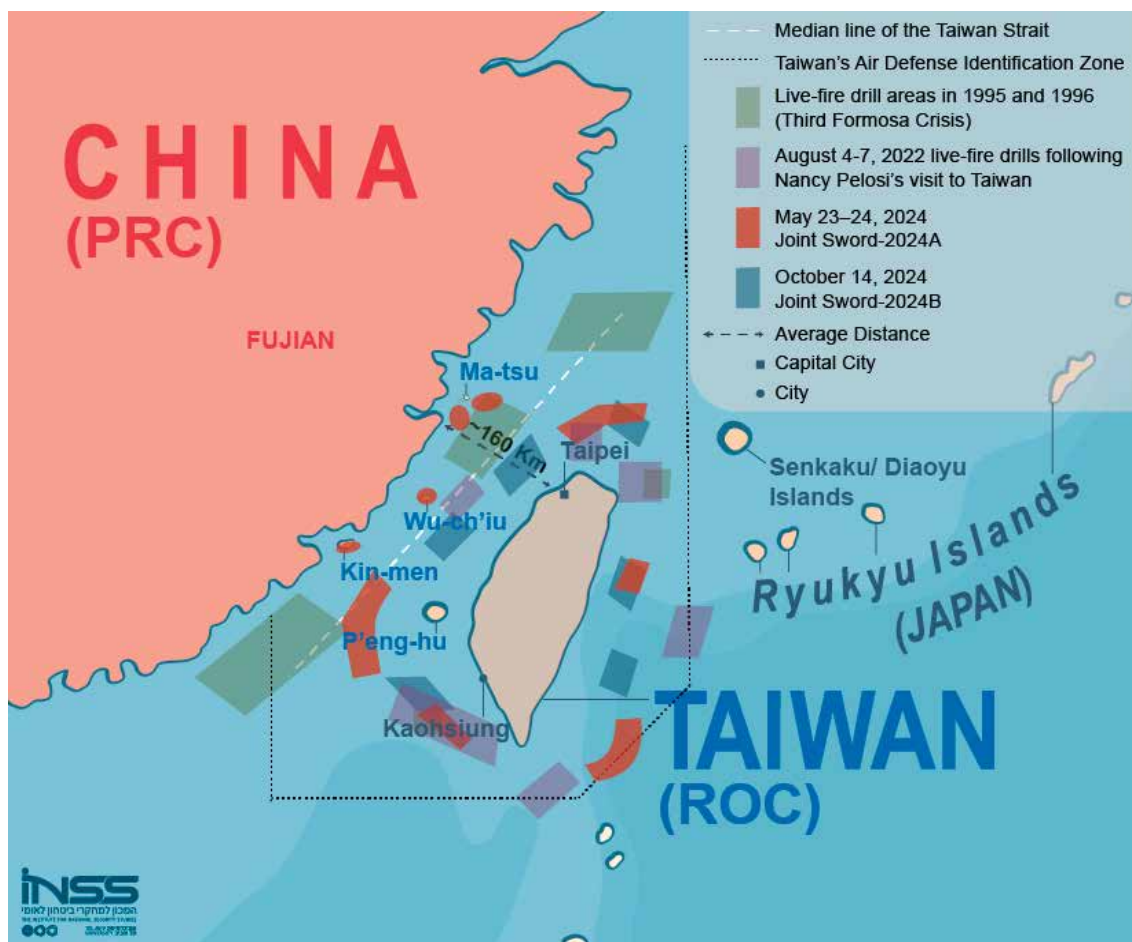
In July 2022, shortly before Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the United States worked vigorously to prevent the supply of chip production equipment (lithography machines) to China. The technological sanctions and restrictions, the partnerships on this issue with Taiwan and

other East Asian countries, and, of course, the broader economic, military, and geostrategic context all significantly increased tensions with China. While Taiwan was not included in the IPEF, a week after its launch, discussions on the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on Twenty-First Century Trade were announced. This declaration and the talks following it (according to the declarations, it appears that the initiative will be signed soon) made it clear that US-Taiwan relations would continue to advance and would not be negatively affected by Taiwan's non-inclusion in the IPEF. Of course, from China's perspective, this was another provocative act (Keegan & Churchmen, 2023). If, in addition to the issues of economics, technology, and geostrategic alliances, we also add the issue of American arms sales to Taiwan—which, according to reports to the US Congress, grew to record levels of over 10 billion dollars in 2022 (and, of course, continued afterward)—the growing tension with China is completely understandable.

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Thus, as it became clear that Pelosi was indeed expected to visit Taiwan (the trip was originally planned for April but postponed because Pelosi tested positive for COVID-19), China attempted to send the United States a clear and strong message that it saw such an action as completely unacceptable. The fact that China was celebrating the 95th anniversary of establishing its liberation army did not help calm the situation. Diplomatic entreaties were made, including a phone call between President Xi and President Biden in which the Chinese president said that "those who play with fire will perish by it," but in vain. In addition, numerous

Figure 5. Map of Chinese military activity around Taiwan in the main exercises since Pelosi's visit



Design: Shay Librowski

items directly or indirectly related to the visit were disseminated in the Chinese media, such as photographs of nuclear missiles being moved within China or fabricated items about attacks, protests, etc., aimed more at Chinese public opinion than world opinion. While the Biden administration signaled that it was unhappy with the visit at that time, it also made it clear that it could not force Pelosi not to visit Taiwan. China did not accept this statement, and American reiteration of no change in US policy toward Taiwan or regarding the One China policy did not convince China, which may have preferred not to be convinced, in order to present itself as the victim of an irresponsible American administration (Zhao, 2023).

Thus, China announced a series of massive exercises near Taiwan, defining specific areas as

no-fly or no-sail zones where the exercises were conducted. On August 4, within less than an hour and a half, China launched 11 short-range ballistic missiles, apparently DF-15B missiles, at marine areas around Taiwan. Four of the missiles passed (at high altitude) over the island itself and struck east of it, and five of them fell in Japan's exclusive economic zone. During these exercises, artillery shells and short-range rockets were also fired, and a variety of other weapons were utilized, including drones that may have flown over actual Taiwanese areas. All of these operated from several provinces near the Chinese coast, including Fujian, Zhejiang, and apparently Jiangxi, so China's Eastern Theater Command (東部戰區), which was defined in the military reforms of 2015-2016, could relatively comprehensively practice its

capabilities, including the rocket force, the air force, the navy, and more. Civilian boats and ships also took part, whether by helping the blockade or, according to various claims, by providing actual logistical assistance to the navy. The exercises, including incursions by aircraft and ships, continued intensively for several days, and afterward, mainly aircraft incursions continued at a higher rate than in the period before the visit. In addition, there were occasional reports of cyber-attacks in Taiwan, though not on an enormous scale as previously feared, as well as continued Chinese propaganda (Dotson, 2023).

Beijing also announced a series of “countermeasures” in response to the visit, including canceling the talks between commanders of the military commands of China and the United States, canceling the Defense Policy Coordination Talks (DPCT), canceling the meetings for discussions on the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), suspending collaborations on illegal immigration, suspending collaborations on legal aid in the field of crime and international crime, suspending collaborations in the war on drugs, and suspending climate change talks (Waijiaobu, 2022).

The United States and many other Western countries emphasized that they had not changed their policy on the Taiwan issue (acceptance of the One China policy) and claimed that China was going too far. The fact that the Chinese actions temporarily paralyzed sea and air traffic around Taiwan demonstrated to the world how effective and problematic a Chinese blockade of the island could be. Moreover, many discussions addressed questions of comparing the strength of the Chinese military forces to those of the United States and its allies in the region, along with various predictions regarding when China will decide to invade Taiwan. It seems that the consensus that emerged was that China has created a new status quo with its increased presence, especially by aircraft penetrating the Taiwanese ADIZ and crossing the median

line (Lewis, 2023). In light of the suspension of channels of dialogue with the United States, including the military dialogue, fears increased of an escalation in the East or South China Sea region, especially in the case of a potential, unplanned local incident.

Between Pelosi’s Visit and the 2024 US Presidential Elections

It is important to remember that for both the United States and China, the considerations that guided the development of the crisis surrounding Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan (and beyond it) were not only related directly to Taiwan or the international arena. They were also, and perhaps mainly, internal considerations: The United States was heading into midterm elections, and China was preparing for the National Congress. In the United States, the China issue had long ago, certainly after the 2016 elections, become a way to score political points on both sides, with Democrats and Republicans competing over who could denounce China more loudly. In this context, Taiwan had become a tool for candidates to show their voters how strong they were in standing up to China. In other words, if Pelosi had given up on her visit or if the president had publicly (and firmly) asked her not to visit Taiwan, this would have been perceived as a sign of weakness and cost political support.

The Chinese National Congress, where Xi was standing for re-election, potentially for an unprecedented third term as the party’s general secretary, created a situation where the Chinese president also needed to look strong and responsive and could not show restraint, even if he had wanted to. Moreover, internal problems, chiefly protests against the zero-COVID policy, were also a motive for redirecting public attention toward Taiwan. While in China’s case, it is very doubtful that the president would have wanted to show restraint in any case—the sense that Taiwan was slipping away and that the United States was violating the agreements was already too strong at that point—the level of

the response could have been more moderate, were it not for the internal needs.

After the congress in China and the midterm elections in the United States, it appeared briefly that the two countries were trying to somewhat soften the tone. Xi and Biden's meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Indonesia (November 2022) seemed positive, and the leaders agreed to reopen previous channels of communication, set up working groups for dialogue on contentious issues on the agenda, and work together on areas of agreement, such as the climate crisis. It was also agreed that Secretary of State Antony Blinken would visit China to implement the new dialogue and particularly to establish "guardrails" for the relationship, in order to prevent it from deteriorating into a more serious and violent conflict. His visit to Beijing was scheduled for January 2023. The leaders' declaration that "a nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won" was also seen as important, especially against the backdrop of Russia's statements throughout the war in Ukraine (Sacks, 2022). However, differences in phrasing and nuances between the statements from Beijing and Washington made it clear that there was still a long way to real agreement. Furthermore, even after the meeting, Chinese military activity around Taiwan continued the trend of increasing the threat.

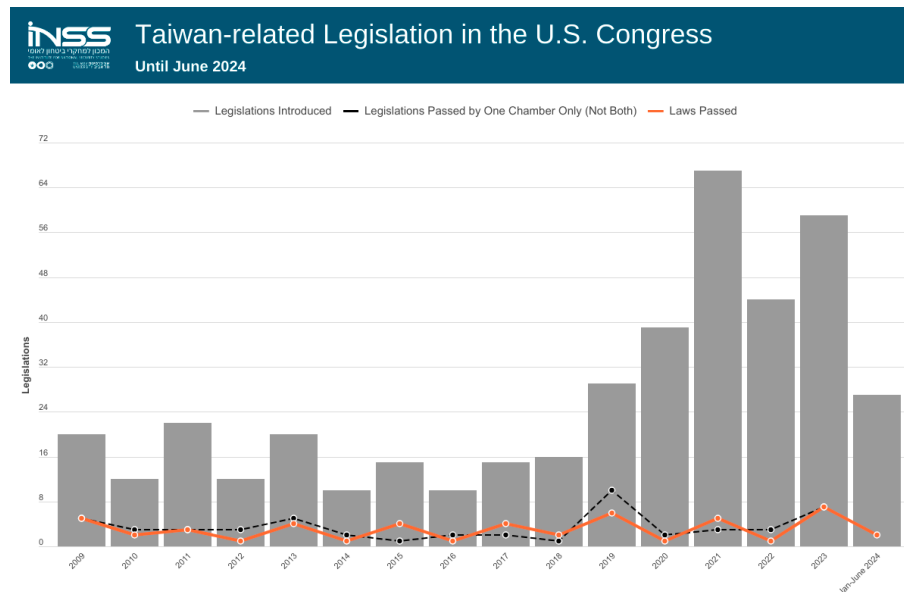
If the new status quo can be termed increased "threat diplomacy," then this kind of conduct by China does indeed continue today. Given that the United States and its allies continue to frequently give China good reasons to express its displeasure, occasional flashpoints in the Taiwan region also occur from time to time. Thus, in November 2022—about a week before the Xi-Biden summit, in light of British trade minister Greg Hands' visit to Taiwan (Yu & Adu, 2022) and the opening of a trade office by Lithuania in Taiwan (MOFA ROC, 2022a), alongside economic and technological talks between the United States and Taiwan, more Chinese aircraft than usual penetrated

Taiwanese airspace and also crossed the median line. Toward the end of November 2022, local elections were held in Taiwan, and the governing party suffered a stinging defeat again, even greater than the 2018 local elections, winning only 5 out of 22 cities and counties. Interpretations of this loss included the island's problematic economic situation (voting based on the internal situation and not according to global geo-strategy) and also claims that perhaps a significant portion of Taiwanese are not very satisfied with the government's policy on the Chinese issue (Hsiao, 2022).

At the end of December 2022, when President Biden signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2023, which for the first time included provisions allowing the sale of up to 10 billion dollars of military equipment to Taiwan (by 2027) as well as additional assistance for the near term (MOFA ROC, 2022b), record numbers of incursions into Taiwanese airspace occurred again: on December 26, 2022, 71 aircraft penetrated Taiwan's ADIZ, of which 43 crossed the median line—the likes of which were not reported even immediately after Pelosi's visit in August (DW, 2022). The following day, Taiwan announced that it would extend mandatory military service from four months to a year starting in 2024 and would increase training (Wang, 2022).

The beginning of 2023 did not mark any positive change in the tension surrounding Taiwan. China continued to conduct major exercises around the island, which decided to lengthen the duration of mandatory military service from three months to a year (starting in 2024, alongside other organizational changes in the Taiwanese defense system that began slightly earlier) (Dotson, 2023), and the United States continued to present the "Chinese threat" and to increase its efforts to raise the issue in a variety of forums, in both the West and Asia. A special committee was created in the US House of Representatives to address the various challenges that China, and specifically the CCP, poses to the United States.⁷ Among

Figure 6. Legislation related to Taiwan in the US Congress, 2009 to June 2024



Source: [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov)

them, Taiwan received special attention. The committee's first session, at the end of February, was explicitly called "The CCP's Threat to America." In it, the committee proposed seven bills, including three directly addressing Taiwan (Cox, 2023). In effect, starting in 2019 and increasingly from 2020, the US Congress became more involved in interactions between the United States and China in general (while focusing attacks against the Communist party specifically, which China interprets as an attack on the system of government), especially on issues related to Taiwan, in a very hawkish manner. We can see that the number of bills related to Taiwan (positively toward Taiwan and negatively toward the PRC, not including bills related only to China) that were presented at the House of Representatives increased by 50 percent from 2018 to 2019 (from 16 to 29). From 2020 to 2023, the average annual number jumped to about 53 bills per year—almost four times the average from 2010 to 2018. While only a few of these bills were enacted as laws—passed in the Senate and signed by the president—these statistics illustrate the intensity

of the anti-China and pro-Taiwan rhetoric in the United States in recent years.

After Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as Speaker of the House of Representatives in August 2022, news of a planned visit to Taiwan (that did not ultimately occur) by the new speaker of the House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy, in the spring of 2023 did not help alleviate the tension and again showed how increased rhetoric by Congress heightens tensions even when it does not result in concrete actions. The number of congressional delegations to Taiwan and the number of participants in them has also increased considerably in recent years, reaching five official delegations with 32 participants in 2023 (compared to one delegation with one participant in 2019—before COVID-19—and three delegations in 2021 and 2022, with 14 and 19 participants, respectively) (Stampfl, 2023). At the same time, a separate series of events surrounding the discovery of a "Chinese spy balloon" over North America in late January and February 2023 again made the dialogue between China and the United States almost nonexistent and certainly not positive.

Immediately after the news of the balloon's discovery, the American secretary of state announced the cancellation of a planned trip to China, instantly annulling the success of the meeting between the presidents in November. The two countries launched into a mutual frenzy, and if there was some hope of dialogue that, especially in the Taiwanese context, would maintain coordination between the superpowers, this hope was shattered. In the middle of February, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with the director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office (the highest-ranking diplomat in China, who was foreign minister previously and became foreign minister again afterward, after the removal of Qin Gang), Wang Yi. However, the meeting did not bear diplomatic fruit and did not reignite significant dialogue between the countries, and the main reports that came out of it were mutual condemnations. Alongside the condemnations, with the anniversary of the outbreak of war in Ukraine in the background, the United States also issued warnings against supplying Chinese weapons and combat equipment to Russia, while China claimed American hypocrisy in the Taiwanese context. That is, according to China: how can the United States demand from China not to supply weapons to Russia when it is supplying weapons to Taiwan? This comparison is based on the Chinese idea that the principle of territorial integrity, as it applies to Ukraine, also applies to China's integrity (with Taiwan inside it).

The Taiwan issue also came up several times at the important political event known as the Two Sessions in March 2023. Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang was asked about Taiwan at a press conference and began his response by quoting from the preamble to China's constitution, which mentions Taiwan: "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of China. It is the sacred duty of all the Chinese people, including our fellow Chinese in Taiwan, to achieve the great reunification of the

motherland." (台湾是中华人民共和国的神圣领土的一部分。完成统一祖国的大业是包括台湾同胞在内的全中国人民的神圣职责). In addition, he drew a parallel between Taiwan and Ukraine. Wang Huning, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee who was elected chairman of the national committee of the CPPCC at the event, reiterated the same principles presented in the past: the Taiwan issue must be resolved; acceptance of the One China principle and the 1992 Consensus are a condition for this; the peaceful resolution of unification is paramount; "Taiwan independence," separatism, and foreign intervention must be firmly opposed; and China must work with its "compatriots" from Taiwan to achieve national revival. The view that the United States is using Taiwan to control China (以台制华) is also a widely cited argument, while emphasizing that the Taiwanese problem is actually the result of Western colonialist-imperialist intervention in East Asia (see, for example, Taiwan Affairs Office, 2023).

During the Two Sessions, it was reported that President Tsai intended to visit the United States in the spring—a report that provoked especially negative responses in China. Although such a visit meant US House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy would not visit Taiwan, from China's perspective both the United States and Taiwan were being underhanded. It seemed that such a visit by the president, which had not occurred since 2019, would not necessarily lead to a weaker Chinese response; it might instead provoke escalation. At the same time, Taiwan announced that it would agree to increase the number of flights between it and the PRC—an issue that China had been trying to advance since it removed the COVID-19 restrictions a few months earlier. However, the continuing increases in China's defense budget alongside more aggressive statements by China's president—who was elected for a third term and also as chairman of the Central Military Commission—did not foster a sense that calmer practices and dialogue in the region were within reach.

And indeed, on March 29, 2023, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen landed in New York for the first time since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was her seventh visit to the United States as president of Taiwan. As usual, her visit was defined only as a “stopover” on her way to Central America, not as an official visit. China strongly opposed the visit, especially the meeting between the president and Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy during her subsequent “stopover” on her way back to Taiwan. While the United States downplayed the meeting, China saw it as another affront and again significantly increased the rate of incursions by its aircraft, as well as large-scale drills and exercises near Taiwan (Wu, 2023b), in keeping with the “new status quo.” These exercises included dozens of aircraft incursions and median line crossings while practicing the use of Chinese aircraft carriers east of the island and the increased use of drones. The visit to Taiwan by Michael McCaul, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, immediately after Tsai’s US visit also prompted anger in Beijing, although the responses to it were relatively restrained, and mainly consisted of personal sanctions against McCaul (Wu 2023a; 2023c).

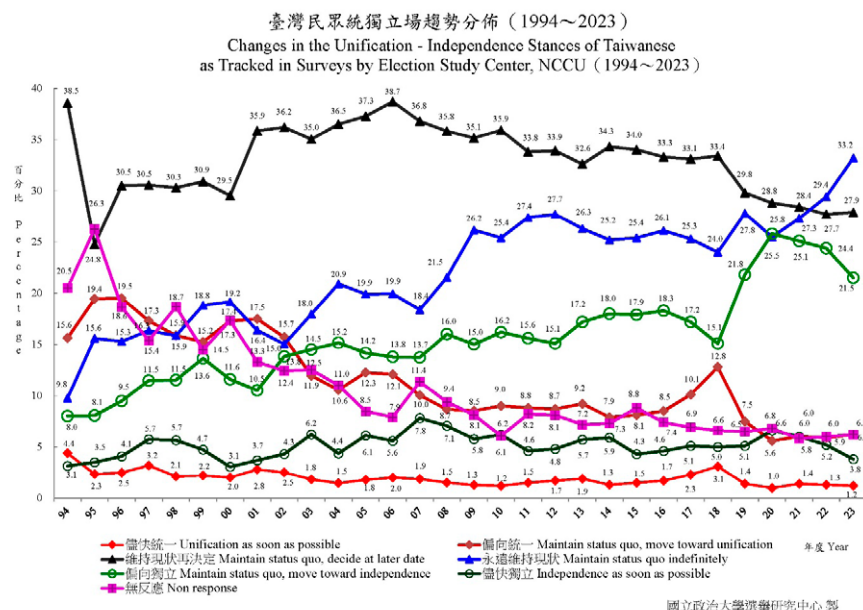
It appears that at this stage, the two sides—the American administration and the PRC’s government—sought to find ways to soften the discourse and the actions between them and to renew crucial collaborations, notwithstanding the inter-superpower competition. Thus, starting in May 2023, a series of high-level meetings and mutual visits brought some calm and led to the renewal of dialogue between China and the United States, which was suspended surrounding Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan. The key events in this context were Blinken’s visit to China and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s meeting with Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe in Singapore in June 2023; visits to China by Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in July; Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo’s

visit to China in August; the resumption of the dialogue (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2023) of joint working groups on cyber and economic issues in September; the visit to China by a delegation of senators led by Chuck Schumer in October; and the climax—the Chinese president’s visit to San Francisco in November and the summit held between him and President Biden, after which the military dialogue between the countries was also renewed. However, in August 2023, for the first time in history, an arms deal with Taiwan was signed as part of the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. While it was a relatively small sum (80 million dollars), the use of the FMF—a program that is supposed to finance sovereign countries—to finance a deal with Taiwan was a fundamental deviation from the norm (Atwood, 2023).

From the Elections in Taiwan to the Inauguration of President Lai

All of the meetings described above were held while Taiwan was in the lead-up to elections for the presidency and the legislature on January 13, 2024. According to reports, China attempted to influence the elections in a variety of ways, particularly through social media and disinformation. But despite the PRC’s attempt to tip the scales in favor of the Kuomintang, William Lai Ching-te, the representative of the DPP, the governing party during the past eight years, was elected with 40 percent of the votes. The DPP lost its majority in the parliamentary elections, falling from 61 to only 51 seats. In contrast, the KMT (Kuomintang) increased from 37 to 52 seats and became the largest party. In addition, the TPP party also increased its representation, from 5 to 8 seats. This led to a situation that is uncommon in Taiwan’s electoral history, in which the president comes from one side of the political map without a parliamentary majority. The TPP could also benefit from holding the balance of power and may attempt to leverage its position without being committed to either of the major parties (Dreyer, 2024).

Figure 7. Changes in Taiwanese stances on the issue of unification/independence, 1994-2023



Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University

President-elect Lai had spoken in the past about Taiwan already being “sovereign and independent” (Reuters, 2023, 2024c)—the core issue in the dispute between Taiwan and the PRC, of course—so many commentators tend to see his election as a provocation toward China. But in practice, with a potentially antagonistic parliament, a balancing dynamic has emerged. In other words, for all of the countries involved, from China to Taiwan to the United States, an opportunity has emerged to bridge the gaps in the conflict or to moderate them, through a balancing act between the president (who China sees as divisive) and the parliament, whose majority parties seek greater cooperation with China.

Despite the elections, China did not change its policy on Taiwan and continued to claim that first and foremost, Taiwan is part of it and there will be no compromises on this point; second, the primary goal is to bring about Taiwan’s return “peacefully”; and it also claimed that only if it becomes clear that there is no chance of such a unification would it not rule out the use of force. Its relatively moderate response—in which

it repeated in various ways the importance of the One China principle and added that this principle is “the strong anchor for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”—perhaps hints at an attempt to maintain quiet in the region at this time. The US president responded explicitly to the question of Taiwanese independence immediately after the elections, saying that Washington “does not support [Taiwanese] independence,” and this, too, was an attempt to maintain the status quo (Sacks, 2024).

However, at the beginning of February 2024, China declared its intention to divert the M503 airway eastward toward Taiwan—a move that was seen not only as violating prior agreements between the two (regarding joint, prior coordination of airways near the island) but also as a military threat (Brar, 2024a). And while in response, the United States called on China to stop the military, diplomatic, and economic pressure on Taiwan, it simultaneously announced that it had completed the upgrade of 139 Taiwanese F16 aircraft at a cost of 4.5 billion dollars (Tirpak, 2024). It also held a military exercise with Japan not far

from Taiwan (Lendon, 2024) while noting—in another simulation of the United States and Japan—that China is the hypothetical adversary in an invasion of the island (Brar, 2024b). A parallel visit by a congressional delegation in Taiwan led by Mike Gallagher (The Select Committee on the CCP, 2024a) did not help ease the tension, of course, nor did a financing request by the US Department of Defense for 500 million dollars' worth of weapons for Taiwan (Chung, 2024), which was published in the middle of March, or the approval of another arms deal with Taiwan as part of a broader law for military aid and arms transfers to Israel, Ukraine, and US allies in the Indo-Pacific region (of which between 2 and 4 billion dollars are apparently intended for Taiwan) (U.S. DoD 2024; Forum on the Arms Trade, n.d.).

But despite all this, the efforts to maintain some stability between the United States and China on the Taiwan issue continued: As mentioned above, in February, Wang Yi and Blinken met on the sidelines of the Munich Conference (Murphy & McBride, 2024); and at the beginning of April, President Xi and President Biden spoke, with the Taiwanese issue on the agenda (Xinhua, 2024). The American side mainly emphasized stability and peaceful methods, while the Chinese side emphasized Taiwan as a part of China and demanded that the United States fulfill its declarations on the One China policy (principle—in the Chinese version) in actions. Another visit by the US Treasury Secretary to China at that time aimed to continue to stabilize relations. On the other hand, at that time, it was reported that the US deputy secretary of state claimed that AUKUS submarines could be used against China in the case of a military conflict surrounding Taiwan, or to deter Chinese aggression (LaMattina, 2024). In parallel, former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou from the Kuomintang visited China again (as he had a year before), and even met with the president of China (Hioe, 2024a; Tsai, 2024). This visit, which included declarations seeking to

highlight the connection between the PRC and Taiwan, was seen as an attempt to undermine the policy of the ruling party in Taiwan and also, implicitly, American policy.

At the beginning of President Lai's inauguration speech on May 20 (Office of the President, ROC, 2024a), the incoming president mentioned the inauguration of the first elected president of Taiwan in 1996. He stated that the then-president (Lee Teng-hui of the Kuomintang) conveyed to the international community at his inauguration the message that Taiwan is "a sovereign and independent country" (主權獨立的國家). But while President Lee stated at his inauguration that Taiwan is sovereign, he explicitly said that "the disputes on both sides of the strait do not relate to questions of ethnic or cultural identity, but only to an argument over the system and way of life. Here we have no need and we cannot adopt the path called 'Taiwan independence'" (海峽兩岸沒有民族與文化認同問題，有的只是制度與生活方式之爭。在這裡，我們根本沒有必要，也不可能採行所謂「台獨」的路線) (Office of the President, ROC, 1985).

Lai's short comment did not become the topic of the speech, and later Lai attempted to display reconciliation toward the PRC, but his opening remarks, and his repetition of the position expressed by his predecessor in 2021 regarding the "four commitments" (四個堅持)—maintaining a free, democratic, constitutional system; preserving Taiwan's independence from China's influence; preserving Taiwan's sovereignty from foreign forces; and deciding Taiwan's future based on the will of its citizens—were enough for the PRC to declare that the new president is a separatist and divisive, and that he must bear the consequences (ChinaPower, 2024a).

Thus, President Lai's inauguration in May was accompanied by a massive Chinese military exercise (Joint Sword 2024A, hinting that there would be additional similar exercises) which was defined as a "punishment" for Lai's inauguration speech, but unlike the military maneuvers

around the island following Pelosi's visit in August 2022, this exercise only lasted two days, did not involve launching missiles around the island, and included fewer air and sea platforms. However, the May 2024 exercise included military activity in areas where the China Coast Guard did not operate in August 2022, in closer proximity to the island, and involved a record number of air and sea platforms around the island on a single day compared to previous exercises (ChinaPower, 2024a, 2024b; DW, 2024; Peterson et al., 2024).

China also announced steps against American companies involved, according to the announcements issued in China, in the sale of weapons to Taiwan and against former member of Congress Mike Gallagher for his support for Taiwan (Reuters, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). China also suspended its talks with the United States on nuclear proliferation in protest of the arms sales agreements and American aid to Taiwan (Roth, 2024). Furthermore, in the days and weeks after the inauguration, China announced that it intends to severely punish, including the death penalty, those who "insist on 'Taiwan independence' and dividing the country" ("台独"顽固分子分裂国家) and published an initial list of names of candidates for prosecution (Ministry of Justice, PRC, 2024).

In parallel to the president's inauguration, Taiwan's legislature, in a clear antagonistic move led by the Kuomintang and the People's Party, pursued a legal reform (or revolution, depending on one's perspective) to provide the legislative branch with closer supervision of the executive branch and the president. However, although in the context of these legislative changes, press reports mainly emphasized the dimension in which the changes are supposed to help the "pro-Chinese" position in Taiwan, the implications of the reforms go well beyond this issue. First and foremost, they relate to internal Taiwanese policy issues, restricting the governance capabilities of the executive branch and the president, as well as questions related to the defense budget and to reports

connected to the defense industry and arms imports in general (Hioe, 2024b).

In any case, there is great opposition to these changes, and the legislative process is currently accompanied by intense public protests, so it is too early to know where things are going. What is clear is that in the current term, the legislative branch, which is antagonistic to the executive branch and the president, intends to provide a practical and conceptual alternative to the DPP, which could—from the perspective of the PRC—be an encouraging factor in the direction of a non-military takeover of Taiwan in the future. Furthermore, from this perspective, the internal tensions in Taiwan are a positive thing, as they create an opening for greater Chinese influence in the media and social networks, and they undermine the power base of the executive branch, certainly for moves seen as unilateral by Taiwan on the Chinese issue.

Conclusion

During the past eight years, China's actions can be interpreted as a policy sometimes called "threat diplomacy" in the literature. This is not a policy that began with Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. It includes a combination of political, economic, diplomatic, cybernetic, and military leverage, and is pursued alongside an "enticement policy" that attempts to present Taiwan with the possible benefits of unification as an overall strategy. However, the threat dimension has dominated the strategy since 2016, and in almost every year since then it has been augmented and intensified. Over these eight years, the systematic use of military threats, especially aircraft incursions, has greatly intensified twice: first, at the end of 2020, and second, since Pelosi's visit. This is in terms of the number of incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ, the variety of aircraft types, and median line crossings.

In this sense, the missile launches immediately after Pelosi's visit were an exceptional case, and the fact that the Chinese military activity surrounding President Lai's

inauguration did not include such launches is important. Compared to the 1995-1996 crisis, when more missiles and more kinds of missiles were launched, for a longer period of time, it seems that the use of missiles surrounding Pelosi's visit was more limited, even if it prompted great global interest at that time. The fact that China apparently chose to use DF-15B missiles and not its more advanced missiles relevant to A2/AD against the United States (for example DF-21D missiles) could also demonstrate a certain restraint. However, there is no doubt that today's China is very far from and much more advanced than the China of the 1995-1996 crisis. It is doubtful that two American carrier battle groups would deter China today as it did during the crisis. China itself now has two operational aircraft carriers (the *Liaoning* and *Shandong*), which maneuvered during the 2022 crisis and also in May 2024, and another aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, is undergoing sea trials. It has also bolstered its nuclear arsenal and made extensive changes to military organization.

On the other hand, it is important to note that China is very consistent in its conduct toward Taiwan. Its declarations have been completely consistent over the past three decades (and more), and the strengthening of ties between China and Taiwan has continued despite President Tsai taking office in 2016 and the increasing use of "threat diplomacy." In effect, even China's military actions in the region come after specific Chinese statements that it will act in this way. It appears that currently, against the background of economic problems and issues of military weakness (from the defense minister who disappeared to the replacement of a large number of generals and reports of weapons deficiencies), China needs stability in the strait, not escalation.

In contrast, the American rhetoric that American policy on the Taiwan issue has been consistent since the 1970s does not, from China's perspective, cohere with the United States' actions on the ground, especially in recent years: from major weapons deals to visits

by senior officials to economic agreements, and of course declarations (intentional or slips of the tongue— from China's perspective it does not matter).

Taiwan itself sometimes seems like a bystander in its own story, becoming a pawn in a much larger game between the two superpowers. Thus, Taiwan is not just a strategic point in the region, but a vital symbol: For China—a symbol of the success or failure of its "national revival"; for the United States—a symbol of its struggle against dictatorship and tyranny and in favor of the values of freedom and democracy (and also, perhaps primarily, a symbol of American global dominance). It is also clear that there is enormous importance in Taiwan's concrete strategic equity, as made clear at the beginning, especially against the backdrop of American efforts to create a system of alliances in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, but this sometimes seems secondary to its symbolic importance. However, Taiwan is not just a bystander: Insofar as it projects symbols that explicitly or implicitly choose a side in the story, the superpowers harden their positions, and such positions sometimes solidify Taiwan's policy in the next phase. Taiwan's attempts to increase its strategic equity, for example on the chip issue, alongside successes in recent decades could also lead its allies to work to decrease their dependence on it (which is already happening), and thus the idea of the Silicon Shield might collapse in the medium term. This is also true of China's responses to its very specific dependence on Taiwan in this respect, while ultimately it is Taiwan that has developed great dependence on China. Moreover, while the changing Taiwanese sense of identity emphasizes Taiwan's distinctiveness from the PRC, the vast majority of Taiwanese still prefer maintaining the status quo and not breaking it (whether toward independence or unification). It is also evident that one of the main reasons Taiwanese oppose unification is related to the PRC's political system and the importance that they ascribe to the liberal

democracy in which they live (Chong et al., 2023).

Thus, while the increasing tension surrounding the Taiwan Strait is sometimes described as deriving only from the actions of the PRC, I would like to argue that the escalation of the tension also stems from the conduct of Taiwan and the United States. The ideal status quo, which they are both apparently striving to maintain (Dickey & Kent, 2024), has not been static, certainly not in the past decade. The new status quo—the term for the Chinese measures of threat diplomacy presented above—is not only the result of PRC aggression. It can, of course, be argued that the American policy on the Taiwan issue was and remains mainly responsive—the United States responded to escalatory measures by China (like the “equation system” familiar in the Middle East)—with China then escalating further, and so on, leading to a mutually reinforcing cycle of deterioration. However, the question of who started the cycle is also not as easy as it seems: not only does the response depend on when you start to examine the issue, it is a dangerous dialectic of a trilateral relationship (at least; more countries can be added to the discussion, of course) in which there is no single starting point and no single side that changes the picture on its own. On the other hand, the fact that from time to time China uses the Taiwan issue as a whip vis-à-vis the United States due to the sale of American weapons for example, and suspends talks that are not related to Taiwan, emphasizes how this issue goes far beyond the strait itself.

The PRC still maintains relations with the Taiwanese opposition party, the Kuomintang. After its impressive success in the local elections in November 2022, along with the worsening economic situation in Taiwan, and its relative success in the legislative elections in January 2024, China has come to see the Kuomintang as a viable partner in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of unification. While in recent years a number of research institutes have considered various war scenarios in which the PRC attacks

Taiwan, it seems that a scenario in which China attempts to bring about change in Taiwanese public opinion—through internal pressure, influence campaigns, economic enticements, as well as a potential blockades and threats—while attempting to cooperate with the Kuomintang, and thus bring about a situation in which the Taiwanese people reaches the conclusion that unification is inevitable, could be more likely. However, it is not clear whether a continuation or intensification of “threat diplomacy” and the various influence campaigns will help or hinder the Kuomintang’s future success—as seen in the 1995-1996 crisis, in the sunflower protests of 2014, or in the responses to the events in Hong Kong around 2019, Chinese actions seen as harsh and proactive often produced the opposite outcome.

In reality, the PRC currently has no interest in using force to change the status quo—in the sense of the continuation of the political situation on both sides of the strait. A military campaign of “unification” would not only be very expensive, in both resources and in human lives, it could also bring disaster to Taiwan itself and thus, even if it ultimately succeeds, in the cost-benefit equation the cost could be unfavorable. Such a military campaign, as China has seen in Ukraine, could also turn the Western world against it economically (sanctions) and even prompt military involvement by the United States, and perhaps also by its allies in the region (Japan, South Korea, and Australia, for example). Such costs could also hurt the Chinese government’s domestic legitimacy, and of course lead to further damage to China’s economy and industry: China relies on the supply of chips for almost every industry in the country, and for now (China is working to change this), this supply is dependent Taiwan. War would mean interrupting the supply chain from Taiwan and creating enormous problems for China and in turn the entire world, which relies on the production and export of its Chinese. Therefore, to the extent that the Chinese government is guided by rational considerations, a military

Figure 8. Air incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ by the Chinese military—monthly comparison between 2023 and 2024



Source: Brown & Lewis, n.d.

campaign does not seem likely in the near term. However, as we know, countries are not always guided by rational considerations, and this is especially true of rulers in authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the “status quo”—new as it may be—is not static: the average monthly number of Chinese Air Force incursions into the Taiwanese air identification zone increased from 141 in 2023 to 300 between March and November 2024 (January and February 2024 are outliers in China “turning down the heat”); the average number of monthly median line crossings increased from 58 in 2023 to 148 between March and November 2024.

Furthermore, the increasing pace and intensity of American measures against China, whether in the Taiwanese context or in other contexts, especially in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years, are in a dialectic relationship with China’s responses, which accordingly are only intensifying. The lack of proper strategic and tactical dialogue between China and the United States could also lead to a situation in which a local incident (for example a plane crash, as in 2001; or a confrontation between two ships in

the crowded area of the South or East China Sea, certainly against the backdrop of the conflict between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea) could unintentionally ignite an escalating series of military responses, at a time when public opinion within both superpowers is not sufficiently tolerant to accommodate such events. Throughout the period of the 1995-1996 crisis, the two powers were in direct contact, meetings were held frequently, and at times a return to the status quo as it was understood in the 1992 Consensus for example, seemed possible. In contrast, in the ongoing crisis since Pelosi’s visit, it appears that the mechanisms of dialogue and damage control between the two superpowers have become an offensive tool (canceling or maintaining them as a political response), and here perhaps lies the main real danger, first of all in the near term. China sees mutual visits by senior American and Taiwanese officials as an unequivocal provocation, and they test the superpowers’ ability to maintain any constructive dialogue and prevent escalation. The fact that 2024 was also an election year in the United States, which, even without the Taiwan issue, raised the level

of tough declarations on China, also raised concerns about the exacerbation of the tensions.

For many years, and certainly since the 1990s, the question has been asked repeatedly, whether and when the PRC will decide to implement the sought-for unification through force, if it does not occur peacefully. Obviously there is no clear answer to this question, and it is doubtful that even the president of China himself has a clear answer to it. Likewise, statements like the one made in the United States that China is planning an invasion or planning to be ready for a military invasion of Taiwan in 2027 are not based on unequivocal knowledge—not only due to the difficulty of obtaining such information (and, as mentioned, it is doubtful that it even exists in China itself) but also due to the changes taking place over time inside China and Taiwan, in East Asia, and in the global arena. Such changes in the economy, technology, public opinion, and global geopolitics are also factors that encourage or inhibit forceful measures by China. However, it appears that China's preferred mode of action, if it does decide to escalate, would be one based on a maritime blockade and perhaps the invasion of an island or islands very close to Taiwan, while continuing its numerous efforts at influence over Taiwan itself.

One way or another, such actions would have a global impact and significance, whether due to the impact on supply chains and production, certainly but not only regarding chips, or due to their broader economic and geopolitical repercussions. Such a situation could also make Taiwan and Israel competitors for US attention and resources, to the extent that both are simultaneously in need of large-scale American aid. The dynamic of trilateral China-Taiwan-United States relations also illustrates the enormous importance of increasing strategic equity for various countries in the global arena.

Epilogue

In the months following Lai's inauguration as president, tensions surrounding Taiwan continued to escalate. More declarations by

all sides, more arms sales from the United States to Taiwan, more antagonistic legislative steps in the US Congress, and of course more military threats from China. Immediately after the inauguration, China held the Joint Sword 2024A military exercise, and in October, it held another exercise, Joint Sword 2024B. They followed President Lai's National Day of Taiwan (October 10) speech, in which he emphasized that Taiwan "is not subordinate" (不隸屬) to the PRC, and that the PRC "has no right to represent Taiwan" (無權代表臺灣). Lai added that he was committed to preventing the erosion of Taiwan's sovereignty or annexation, along with strengthening the island's security and defense. Taiwan's resilience, he claimed, is what will maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan strait—peace and stability that Taiwan is committed to and for which it would be happy to cooperate with the PRC. He also emphasized Taiwan as an example and model of democracy and hinted at China's democratic deficit. At the end of his speech, Lai declared his determination (and, according to him, the determination of all of the political parties in Taiwan) "to protect the national sovereignty" of Taiwan (捍衛國家主權), and immediately afterward, his commitment to maintain "peace, stability, and the status quo" (和平穩定現狀) (Office of the President, ROC, 2024c). These messages, which the PRC undoubtedly saw as contradictory, were, at least according to Chinese statements, what provoked the second major military exercise of the year in the middle of October.

Between these two events (in May and October), Lai visited Kinmen Island, located close to China's coast, in August to mark the 66th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis between China and Taiwan in 1958, in which the island withstood Chinese attacks. Lai called for the preservation of Taiwan's sovereignty, standing firm in the face of the threat from the PRC, and of course also striving for peace and stability on both sides of the strait (Office of the President, ROC, 2024b).

In October 2024, shortly after National Day and after China's second massive military exercise, Lai visited Kinmen again, this time to mark the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Kinmen (one of the few battles that the Kuomintang succeeded in winning in October 1949, thus preserving Taiwan's rule over Kinmen). On this visit, Lai emphasized that no external force could determine the future of Taiwan, and continued to call for dialogue, peace, and stability in the strait (Office of the President, ROC, 2024d).

China, for its part, continues to threaten, with significant increases in the amount of military activity around Taiwan, in accordance with statements by Taiwanese leaders, decisions on American aid or arms sales, and mutual visits of senior American and Taiwanese officials. Legislative measures in the US Congress that are antagonistic toward China have intensified, especially in September 2024, during China Week, when no fewer than 25 anti-China bills were passed in the House of Representatives (The Select Committee, 2024b). At the end of November, when the president of Taiwan visited Pacific island countries (the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau, 3 of the 12 countries that officially recognize Taiwan), and held (unofficial) stopovers in Hawaii and Guam, including a phone call with Speaker of the US House of Representatives Mike Johnson, China's rhetoric once again escalated in denouncing this, and after his return to Taiwan at the end of December, Chinese military activity around Taiwan increased significantly (Guardian Staff, 2024). The headlines wondered if China was holding another exercise, Joint Sword 2024C, and the news that came out mainly from Taiwan, some anonymous and unofficial, revealed a Chinese military deployment, mainly naval, the likes of which had not been seen since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996. Reports that for the time being remain anonymous and unconfirmed revealed that China is operating throughout the first island chain—the imaginary line that connects the islands from Japan in the north to Southeast Asia and is supposed

to serve as a kind of first defensive line east of China (Everington, 2024). The commotion in the Taiwanese media surrounding Chinese military activity perhaps also indicated a desire by the Taiwanese government to turn inward, to the public in Taiwan, to enlist support and to raise awareness of security needs; on the other hand, it appeared that the government also attempted to turn outward to those seen as allies, in an attempt to convey that China's sights are set not only on Taiwan (thus the statements about the first island chain), and to the future Trump administration, as a more general warning call.

China also imposed flight restrictions in areas different from previous exercises (mainly toward the northeast, east of the Chinese coast, approximately from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Shan, 2024), but while China's naval activity was indeed more intense than in the past, there were no reports of especially unusual air activity (unlike previous exercises, so no such deviation appears in the air incursion graph above). The Chinese Foreign Ministry emphasized again and again that the Taiwan issue is a red line that cannot be crossed from China's perspective, and warned that none of the following would be possible: the United States "using Taiwan to control China" (以台制华), Taiwan "relying on the United States in an independence plot" (倚美谋独, or 倚外谋独, using "foreign [countries] in an independence plot"), or any coalition "using military force in an independence plot" (以武谋独). It did so while again accusing Taiwan of divisiveness and the use of "external forces." A direct response to questions about its specific military activity was not given, and a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry merely declared that "there is no Taiwanese Defense Ministry" (the body that reported the rise in Chinese military activity) and that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China and an internal matter (China Daily, 2024; Global Times, 2024).

It is also important to remember that along with the tension and alienation in China-Taiwan relations on the G2G (government-to-

Figure 9. Trade between Taiwan and China (including Hong Kong) according to Taiwan customs data, monthly comparison between 2023 and 2024.



Data from Mainland Affairs Council, Ministry of Finance, Republic of China

government) level, China continues to make an effort to use positive leverage to influence Taiwan's residents. Thus, at the same time as the increased military activity in December 2024, a variety of activities were held in China—from conferences for businesspeople from both sides of the strait to visits by university students and, immediately after the military activity, another visit to China, the second in 2024, by Ma Ying-jeou. Moreover, a sister city forum of Taipei and Shanghai was held in Taipei. In all of these events, the main Chinese message is emphasized again and again: acceptance of the 1992 Consensus and the One China principle; opposition to

“Taiwan independence”; condemnation of the DPP; and encouragement of the “shared desire” of all citizens of China (that is, including Taiwan) for unification (Zhongguo Taiwan wang, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Thus, China is increasing both the military pressure, the stick, and also the civilian incentive, the carrot. It is thus no surprise that trade between China and Taiwan did not contract in 2024, even increasing by 3.5 percent over 2023, while Taiwan continues to enjoy a considerable trade surplus (about 70 billion dollars).

It appears that the message intended by China's military maneuvers in December 2024 was not only or mainly a response to Lai's trips. Instead, China used the opportunity, which fell into its hands like ripe fruit, to send a message to the new administration in the United States, both as a kind of preliminary demarcation of boundaries for the United States (Taiwan as a Chinese red line), and perhaps also from China's perspective (what it does not intend to go beyond in the near future). Unlike in the past, China did not officially declare the exercise, did not define a timetable, and in effect

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also maintained a deafening silence during the days when its military activity increased, and did not discuss it. This was while social media in China was buzzing and there were discussions and rumors about the activity. It appears that China has decided to adopt a kind of policy of ambiguity this time, whether in order to heighten concerns in Taiwan or to avoid provoking harsher criticism and counter-responses from the United States.

And indeed, the Biden administration maintained moderate, perhaps moderating, responses (Reuters, 2024d) while Donald Trump went a step further. In an extraordinary step, he invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to participate in his inauguration in January 2025. In the background, Trump and members of his future administration made declarations on intensifying the economic measures against China, and China declared its intentions to enact similar measures. Although the president did not come to Trump's inauguration—the invitation may have been perceived by the Chinese as American patronage—the invitation itself (and sending the Chinese vice-president to the inauguration), along with another statement by Trump that “China can help” achieve an agreement in Ukraine, could indicate Trump's intention to reach a settlement with China, apparently first trading economic blows after his inauguration. The question of whether Taiwan will need to pay part or most of the price of such a settlement remains open at this stage.

The complex technological relations between the United States and Taiwan will be tested as the United States transfers more production to its territory, raising the question of Taiwan's strategic importance to the United States, including the question of the cost for Taiwan. There are already American claims that Taiwan is not even a national American interest, let alone a national security interest. Of course, the attitudes of the key people who will influence the administration's position on this issue, such as Elon Musk, who has

clear interests in mainland China, could also affect the administration's approach. Finally, a certain undermining of the lower-level sets of US alliances (mini-laterals) in the Indo-Pacific region, which the Biden administration invested in, could also affect Taiwan's importance to the United States and its security. A potential undermining of US-Taiwan relations would strengthen China's position. And this, along with the significant economic challenges that China is facing, could actually lead China to feel less threatened, to slow things down, and not necessarily to intensify the military actions surrounding the island or the planning of military actions. For Taiwan, such a situation could, in the future, lead the president to moderate his tone, and potentially explore a cautiously conciliatory posture towards China. To all these we must add the escalating processes in the South China Sea, which is adjacent to the Taiwan sector. These processes could exacerbate the problems, but they require a separate discussion.

One way or another, the “status quo” of the past is long gone, although ostensibly the situation remains as it was. China has not invaded Taiwan, Taiwan has not declared independence, and the United States continues to adhere to the One China policy. However, the escalating rhetoric by all sides, the shift in Chinese military activity around Taiwan, the increased involvement of the US Congress (in visits, legislation, and approving arms deals), and the pace and intensity of the declarations by Taiwan's president—these all reflect a different and more fragile status quo than in the past, and a more dangerous one. This does not mean that we should expect all-out war in the short term. None of the sides, including China, currently has an interest in this, and the intensity of the civilian ties, despite the deadlock and even deterioration in relations between the governments in Beijing and Taipei, proves that the military-political dimension is only one of many.

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- Xi's second term, I will emphasize the “Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP on the Main Achievements and the Historical Experience of the Party During 100 Years of Struggle” (中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议) from 2021, which sketches China's historical development (from the perspective of the CCP, of course), on the way to the climax of the “new era” and its implications, including in the global arena. See Zhonggong zhongyang, 2021.
- 2 Taiwan was not supposed to be a member of the TPP in the first stage, but the agenda did include discussions on it joining in the future.
 - 3 Some of the deals were delayed or not carried out during Trump's term, but this is not unusual for these kinds of deals with Taiwan.
 - 4 The ADIZs of Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea were determined by the United States in the 1950s, when the term ADIZ came into use (in the context of the Cold War). These areas underwent adjustments, and later, related legislative issues arose as well. It should be noted that the “median line” in the strait between the PRC and Taiwan began in the 1950s, and although in theory Taiwan's ADIZ, as drawn by the Americans, penetrates deep into the borders of mainland China, in practice the median line is seen as delineating the Taiwanese ADIZ in the direction of China. See also Charbonneau et al., 2015; Rinehart & Elias, 2015.
 - 5 The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) is an initiative launched by President Biden in May 2022 during his visit to East Asia. The initiative was supposed to connect 14 countries from the US to India in the Indo-Pacific region, exclude the PRC, and serve as an alternative to Obama's TPP initiative, which Trump abandoned after taking office. Through economic and diplomatic agreements, the initiative, when implemented, is supposed to boost trade between the countries; supply chains; the discussion of climate, energy, and infrastructure issues; and the fight against corruption (The White House, 2022b).
 - 6 The “silicon shield” is an idea that developed starting at the beginning of the 2000s based on the assumption that because Taiwan has become a vital link in the chip production and supply chain, especially for advanced chips, the world, which depends on this, would defend it if attacked, and the PRC itself, which needs chips from Taiwan, would refrain from attacking it.
 - 7 The United States House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party

Notes

- 1 Among the seminal documents of these conceptions, as they crystallized over the course of President



The Institution of the Russian Family under the Putin Regime and the War in Ukraine

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Since the onset of the war against Ukraine, the Russian regime has instrumentalized the institution of the family to reinforce its anti-Western stance and legitimize its military invasion. By promoting the Putin family model, which emphasizes large families and traditional marriage, the Kremlin has consolidated authoritarian control and extended state influence over the private sphere. This strategy has been accompanied by the increasing repression of marginalized groups and the systematic restriction of women's rights. The Putin family model also provides an ideological and moral justification for the war in Ukraine: the conflict is framed as a broader struggle against Western liberalism, particularly in its assault on family values.

Key words: Russia, Russia-Ukraine war, ideology, institution of the family.

Introduction—The Question of Ideology

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in February 2022 as the largest conflict in Europe since World War II, has reignited academic debate on whether the Putin regime possesses a coherent ideology. Scholars have broadly agreed that the Soviet Communist regime adhered to a clear ideological framework that shaped its vision of a future society. In the post-Soviet era, however, and particularly under Putin's rule, ideological foundations are far less clear. While some scholars argue that the war demonstrates Putin's ambition to restore Russia's imperial stature and reestablish it as a global competitor to the West, others reject that ideological framing and instead see the war as the cynical tool of the Russian elite to consolidate power and maintain legitimacy.¹

From a methodological standpoint, a discussion of ideology in this context raises complexities and challenges. A major pitfall is the reproduction of the binary framework that dominated Western scholarship on the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century—particularly evident in the frequent pairing of categories such as repression and resistance, state and society, official culture and counterculture, totalitarian language and opposition language, the public “I” and the private “I,” truth and falsehood, and morality and corruption (Yurchak, 2006, pp. 4-5). Despite the profound transformations precipitated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, contemporary research on post-Soviet Russia remains tethered to this historiographical paradigm, maintaining

a focus on the leader's cult of the personality and his decisions. What emerges is two-dimensional: a monolithic and unchanging regime set against the homogeneous society under its rule. This approach leaves little room for understanding social and cultural processes as part of a more nuanced system—one that is shaped by many complexities, including the balance of power among social classes, political and military circumstances, and the various ways these factors are interpreted by various groups within the population.

To avoid this pitfall, this article approaches ideology as a set of cultural and social norms within a given historical context.² Instead of assessing the extent to which Putin's regime is driven by ideology, we conceptualize the ideological dimension as a process of cultural construction. More specifically, how has the Putin regime instilled behavioral and cultural norms in the context of the war in Ukraine? The innovation here is to highlight the inseparability of Putinism's international and internal agendas; we claim that Russia's foreign policy cannot be understood without a cultural analysis of its domestic policy. Our test case is the way that the regime has glorified the family, an institution that has become central to public discourse in Russia and that sociologists view as much more than a network of kinship relations; the family upholds and reinforces a society's values (Casey, 1989, pp. 1-14). We explore several key questions: What defines the family? How does the institution of the family serve internal and external political agendas? And in what ways is the Putin regime utilizing the concept to promote its ends?

The article consists of three sections. The first outlines Russia's search for an ideological path after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in light of a conceptual detachment from the West under Putin. The second examines the institution of the family in Russia, with attention to the boundaries that define it and its increasing importance, to the point that it has become a matter of national security. The final section

explores how the model of the ideal family is being instilled among Russian citizens and shows how this model is being implemented in Russia and the occupied territories of Ukraine.

The Search for an Ideological Path under Yeltsin and Putin

Historically, Russia's position between Europe and Asia has raised complex questions about its identity. Does Russia belong to the West or the East? Can it be considered European in terms of its ideology and cultural principles? The answers have varied with the unique circumstances of each era. The question of Russia's distinct path (*Sonderweg*)—its essence and character—resurfaces especially during social, cultural, and political crises. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the subsequent surge of nationalism in Eastern Europe, Russian leaders found themselves, once again, at this crossroads.³

The Communist vision that had guided Russian politics and strategy gave way to the search for a new identity. With Boris Yeltsin's rise to power in 1991, that new identity took the form of moving closer to the West by adopting free-market economic principles. Entrepreneurship and private ownership were fostered, and state assets were privatized. This period saw the sale of state-owned oil and gas companies, such as Yukos and Sibneft, alongside other major factories, enterprises, and industries that had been under state ownership for decades. These assets were offered at bargain prices to politically connected individuals who promised to support Yeltsin, a practice that effectively turned Russia's government into an oligarchy (Judt, 2009, pp. 813-806). It is important to note that some members of this emerging business and political elite sought political change, positioning themselves as philanthropists and civic leaders with a new social vision for Russia.⁴ At the same time, the country underwent a process of democratization and developed political and cultural openness to the West. Positioning itself as a Western and European

state within the diplomatic landscape, Russia was integrated into the G8 and became a member of the Council of Europe. Russian cities began to reshape themselves in line with Western urban aesthetics.

A major shift began with the transfer of power to Vladimir Putin in March 2000. Putin expected the new group of oligarchs to submit to his authority and relinquish their assets. He wanted a centralized regime based on a closed political system, with absolute control over information and financial capital, and little tolerance for opposition. Putin also introduced, but gradually, a set of ideological principles that can now be seen as milestones in his domestic and foreign policy. Over time, these principles have positioned Russia as an alternative to the West. This ideological shift was not immediately apparent. Shortly after his election, Putin assured Bill Clinton, “It is clear to the whole world that I am a person you can work with.... I think we have a good basis for U.S.-Russian relations, which was established by you and the first Russian president, Yeltsin, and we have all the foundations to further develop our relations” (White House, 2000, p. 2). In retrospect, it seems that Putin’s initial efforts to strengthen ties with the West, and particularly with the United States, had little to do with any intention to align Russia with Western values or governance models. Instead, Putin appears to have been motivated by the desire to consolidate his rule in Russia and gain the trust of Western countries.

When the war against Ukraine began in February 2022, deepening Russia’s isolation diplomatically, scientifically, economically, and culturally, the regime felt a greater urgency to define an identity in direct opposition to the West.

A turning point in Russia’s separation from the West was Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. Putin outlined an explicitly isolationist stance, emphasizing the

uniqueness of Russian nationalism and Russia’s difference from Western countries, particularly the United States. Another key moment came in April 2014, with the publication of “Political Fundamentals of State Cultural Policy” by the Russian Ministry of Culture. The document asserted Russia’s distinctiveness from Europe and upheld the country’s right to return to its traditions and culture as a deliberate alternative to Western-style liberalism (Ukaz Prezidenta RF N 808, 2014). The turn away from the West gained momentum in the months after the Euromaidan, the spontaneous protests in 2013 over the Ukrainian government’s abrupt decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. The Ukrainian government’s attempts to suppress the protests were unsuccessful, and ultimately the pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was ousted. Russia responded with the invasion of eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea (Shveda & Park, 2016), events that triggered international condemnation. Europe and America imposed sanctions against Russia, including an arms embargo, a ban on military cooperation, restrictions on transactions with Russian banks, and visa bans on individuals associated with the military offensive. Russia shifted ever more rapidly toward isolationism.

Nonetheless, Putin demanded international recognition of Russia’s national rights, and he presented that demand as a rectification of the past: his country was finally breaking free of the restrictions that other countries had imposed on it for centuries. “There is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line, acting crudely, irresponsibly, and unprofessionally,” Putin declared in March 2014 (President of Russia, 2014). But when the war against Ukraine began in February 2022, deepening Russia’s isolation diplomatically, scientifically, economically, and culturally, the regime felt a greater urgency to define an identity in direct opposition to the West. Putin no longer sought Western recognition, as he had in his 2014 speech; after the invasion, his

statements reflect a growing alienation. On the eve of the war, Putin remarked, in reference to the American people, “Although they think that we are the same as they are, we are different people. We have a different genetic, cultural, and moral code” (BBC News, 2021). The rupture that Putin had previously framed as a political crisis assumed an essentialist, value-laden character.

This forging of Russia’s identity in recent years has significant implications both domestically and internationally. The ideological foundation of Putin’s regime can be summarized as follows: Russia has strength and superiority as a stable world power (statism) that constitutes a civilization in and of itself (state civilization), and therefore Russia possesses a unique way of life that is distinct from the West (Snegovaya & McGlynn, 2025). By habitually referring to Russia as a civilization rather than a nation-state, Putin endows the country with historical depth and longevity. This attitude legitimizes military action in Ukraine and reinforces a stance of cultural and moral superiority over the West.⁵

This process has also involved a new security doctrine. In the 1990s, Russia conceived of its security in terms of military defense against military and paramilitary threats (*zashchishchennost*). Now, however, the conceptualization is broader; as described in 2020 by Vladimir Nazarov and Dmitry Afinogenov, members of Russia’s Security Council, the doctrine is “security through development.” Social issues have become part of the mission (Nazarov & Afinogenov, 2020, pp. 9-19; Cooper, 2022). As a result, cultural and historical matters, including the question of Russian identity, constitute matters of national security, not just topics for intellectual and moral debate (Snegovaya & McGlynn, 2025, p. 7). Traditional values—including the institution of the Russian family—can now legitimize military action.

Domestically, the Putin regime’s anti-Western stance has produced a conservative agenda. Fostered by nationalist politics and

the glorification of Russia’s unique history and values, this agenda is presented by government and state officials as a return to the country’s authentic path—a path that had been abandoned because of cosmopolitan and Western influences. The regime understands itself to be waging war not only against Ukraine, but also against the external influences that prevent Russia from assuming its true character. But it is important to note the inaccuracy in this portrayal. In its cultural war, Russia is not unveiling its true identity but constructing a new one in response to immediate political needs. After all, notions of old and new are to a large extent ideological constructs. While the discourse of a return to Russia’s authentic values grants the regime a political legitimacy it may otherwise lack, that discourse is selective. The regime embraces the parts of the past that serve its political interests but casts aside the more problematic elements of history and memory.

The Growing Political Significance of the Family Institution under the Putin Regime

With the collapse of the Communist regime, the totalitarian political system disintegrated, along with its unique social contract with the citizens. The system was based on the use of force and violence, but under the social contract, most people were shielded for most of the time if they respected cultural boundaries and helped to maintain those boundaries within their immediate surroundings. This requirement demanded vigilance and careful attention to the regime’s signals and ideological fluctuations; as Hannah Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, such boundaries are not monolithic but dynamic and constantly shifting. (Arendt, 1976, p. 76; Gessen, 2017, p. 99). One major shift was the emergence of private life as a matter of political significance during the second half of the Soviet regime, as Stalin’s police empire collapsed. This shift was driven by the belief that every personal choice carried far-reaching social and political implications

(Field, 2007). The regime increasingly sought to define what constituted a proper private life, including life within the family. From the 1950s onward, the institution of the family also became a significant component in the construction of communism: the private family formed the basis of the “great proletarian family,” a workers’ alliance envisioned as the foundation of a utopian society. This period redefined the boundaries and functions of the family, as well as its proper relationship to kinship and community structures (Itkin, 2025).

The promotion of large families is more than a question of traditional values; the campaign is also a concerted attempt to address Russia’s urgent need for more citizens.

The dogmatic ideal of the family, along with the need to conform to it as part of the social contract, waned with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Surveys conducted in the 1980s showed that Soviet citizens had grown weary of communist ideology, objecting particularly to the notion of the family as a central pillar of the communist collective. Citizens had instead come to view the family as a refuge from the regime’s demands. In the final years of Soviet rule, the family became an agent of privatization and individualization (Shlapentokh, 1991). In the 1990s, even though Soviet-era attitudes about private life remained largely intact at the state level, the rapid political transition, along with new economic needs and principles, gave rise to more liberal family policies. For example, despite the Soviet Union’s prohibition against homosexuality, a queer cinema festival was held in the two central locations of Leningrad and Moscow in early 1991, constituting the first significant event of Russia’s LGBTQ movement (Gessen, 2017, pp. 101-102). Homosexuality was officially decriminalized in 1993.

That process of democratization and liberalization came to an end with Putin’s rise to power. His regime has promoted the traditional

family, which it defines by two key features: heterosexual marriage and a large number of children. That model has become a central focus of propaganda, with politicians, clergymen, journalists, writers, publicists, and other figures emphasizing the family’s vital role in education and the inculcation of Russian values. Putin, who actively molds the current ideological discourse, frequently expresses his view of the family as the foundation of state and society; the family both reflects and shapes contemporary Russian society and its values. He appeals to history to support the model that he promotes: “Let us remember that in Russian families, our grandmothers and great-grandmothers had seven or eight children, or even more. Let us preserve and revive this tradition. Having many children, a large family, should become the norm and a way of life for everyone in Russia” (Gereykhanova, 2023a). Not coincidentally, Putin’s rhetoric on the family bears a religious tone; he has exalted the family, for example, as “a spiritual phenomenon, the basis of human morality” (Gereykhanova, 2023b). Since Kirill’s election as Patriarch of Moscow in 2009 and the beginning of Putin’s third term in 2012, relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the regime have grown increasingly close. The church has endorsed Putin’s conservative and isolationist ideology (Soroka, 2022), and Putin has supported the church’s advocacy for conservative family values with his promotion of the traditional family.

But the promotion of large families is more than a question of traditional values; the campaign is also a concerted attempt to address Russia’s urgent need for more citizens. A prolonged decline in the country’s birthrate has persisted for several decades, leading to the depopulation of entire regions, including northern Russia, eastern Siberia, and the Russian Far East. Government efforts to reverse this trend have largely failed, despite occasional successes, and Russia has become the world’s third country, after China and Japan, to experience negative natural population

growth. The year 2023 marked a demographic low point, with the number of births matching that of 1999, and projections for 2024 indicated a continuation of the downward trend (Lebedeva, 2024). The crisis is exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, which has led to battlefield casualties as well as increased emigration, and the long-term consequences will persist for decades.⁶ The regime is particularly concerned about two threats to national security: a reduction in the country's capacity to sustain a large and powerful military and a weakening of the national economy.

As part of the regime's pro-natalist policy, demography is emerging as a key factor in the Kremlin's assessment of local governments. Starting in 2025, a governor's failure to meet demographic targets may serve as grounds for dismissal or the denial of promotion. An interesting point is the difference that is anticipated between the approaches of wealthier and poorer regions. To encourage higher birth rates, wealthier regions are expected to rely on financial incentives, such as direct grants to mothers, while poorer regions are expected to intensify propaganda that promotes childbirth (Verstka, 2024).

In keeping with these efforts, Putin's regime has introduced legal changes that discourage abortion. Since the 2010s, advertising for abortion procedures has been banned, and doctors have had the right to refuse abortions on the grounds that the procedure conflicts with their religious beliefs. Political opposition to abortion has become stronger in the past few years. In the summer of 2022, Russian Minister of Health Mikhail Murashko called for the stricter enforcement of regulations governing the sale of abortion-inducing drugs, and in 2023, the Ministry of Health publicized a set of recommended responses for doctors, with the intention of persuading patients to carry their pregnancies to term (Minzdrav Rossiyskoi Federatsii, 2023). Additional measures have included the closure of private clinics that perform abortions and the imposition of fines

on individuals and organizations that encourage women to terminate their pregnancies. In November 2023, Putin himself referred to abortion as an urgent issue for the regime.

Starting in 2025, a governor's failure to meet demographic targets may serve as grounds for dismissal or the denial of promotion.

These restrictions on clinics, doctors, and pregnant women reflect a governmental stance against a woman's right to make her own decisions about her body and family—a stance that neatly aligns with the ideology of traditional values, which promotes the notion that childbirth is a woman's primary role. Not surprisingly, Putin emphasized this role in his address to Russian women on International Women's Day, March 8, 2024: "You, dear women, are capable of changing the world... above all, through the greatest gift that nature has given you—giving birth to children. Motherhood is the destiny of women" (Telekanal ROSSIIA 1, 2024). In hearty agreement is the Russian Orthodox Church, which vehemently opposes abortion and sees traditional gender roles as a reflection of God's will. In a sign of this growing alignment between the church and the regime, newly pregnant women at health clinics in 16 regions of Russia have begun to receive letters from the Patriarch, blessing their pregnancies and discouraging them from seeking abortions (RIA Novosti, 2024).

In recent months, the government has also been working to outlaw organizations that promote childlessness, which are seen to promote a Western lifestyle. "Propaganda encouraging people to be child-free is a dangerous social phenomenon. The Americans are the ones behind it. Our country is vast, and their ideology is dangerous," stated Vyacheslav Volodin, chairman of the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, in late September 2024 (Gosudarstvennaya Duma, 2024). Once enacted, the proposed law against such propaganda is

expected to impose non-compliance fines of 400,000 rubles on individuals and five million rubles on organizations. In a push for such organizations to be classified as extremist, some government officials want to model the law on one that bans LGBTQ propaganda (see below). In addition, proposals have called for a revival of Soviet-era policies, such as the imposition of fines on childless families or the prohibition against building one-room apartments in major cities, the sort of dwelling that would encourage single living. It is fascinating to note that against the background of all this activity, demographers and researchers claim that such organizations promoting a child-free lifestyle in Russia are extremely rare and have little to no social significance (Moscow Times, 2024b).

Particularly notable is the justification for a law passed in November 2023, which officially classified the LGBTQ community as an extremist entity: the LGBTQ community, the legislation claimed, is part of a global Western movement that aims to undermine Russia's unique identity, especially by attacking the institution of the family

Another phenomenon the government is targeting is Russia's relatively high divorce rate, which the Russian Federal Service for State Statistics (*Rosstat*) has recently found to coincide with a slight decline in marriage rates. Of every 1,000 people, 7.2 married in 2022, compared with 6.5 in 2023; over those two years, the divorce rate remained unchanged, at 4.7 per 1,000 people. With these figures, Russia ranks among the countries with the highest divorce rates worldwide (*Rosstat*, 2024). As part of its emphasis on family, the regime is introducing measures to discourage divorce. A law passed by the Duma in December 2024 requires individuals seeking a divorce to attend multiple sessions for psychological counseling (Agadzhanov, 2024), and beginning in 2025, the tax on divorce proceedings is rising from 650 to 5,000 rubles per person (Moscow Times, 2024a).

Putin is also targeting homosexuality and transsexuality. His regime has always encouraged homophobia, but the attitude became official policy in 2013, when a law was passed to ban the dissemination of information about homosexuality. Additional legislation followed. Same-sex couples are barred from adopting children, no children may be adopted at all from countries that allow homosexual relations, LGBTQ activists are openly persecuted, and gender transitioning is banned. Particularly notable is the justification for a law passed in November 2023, which officially classified the LGBTQ community as an extremist entity: the LGBTQ community, the legislation claimed, is part of a global Western movement that aims to undermine Russia's unique identity, especially by attacking the institution of the family. Effectively, LGBTQ individuals have been legally defined as a threat to the state. Conversely, the heteronormative family was enshrined in the Russian constitution through an amendment ratified in 2020: "The role of the state is to protect the family, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood; to defend the institution of marriage as a union between a man and a woman" (Article 114V).

One of the prime motivations for all these efforts appears in a July 2021 directive, *Russia's National Security Strategy*, which stated that the Russian family is a fundamental pillar of national security, and therefore the protection of the family must be a national priority. This is quite a change from the previous directive, which was issued in December 2015 and mentions the family only briefly. In the directive of 2021, the family has become a moral and spiritual bulwark against existential threats not only to Russia but to all of humanity. According to the document, "The changes taking place in the modern world affect not only interstate relations but also universal human values... Humanity is faced with the threat of losing its spiritual and moral way. Basic moral norms, the institution of marriage, and family values are being increasingly undermined" (Ukaz

Prezidenta RF, 2021, Sections 85-87). Russia reinforces its broader ideological stance against the West by identifying it as the source of these allegedly dangerous values.

Since February 2022, Russia has leveraged this security narrative as a moral and political justification for the invasion of Ukraine. In Russian political discourse, Ukraine is a state that has surrendered to the West and fallen under its destructive influence (Soroka, 2022, p. 14). Shortly after the invasion, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church described the war as a necessary step to protect the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine from the moral decay stemming from Ukraine's "Western-controlled" government. Similarly, Governor Alexander Beglov of St. Petersburg underscored the significance of traditional values in the war effort: "Soldiers who saw bathrooms in schools [in Donetsk and Luhansk] with three rooms instead of two—male, female, and non-binary—need no explanation as to which values we are fighting for." Among those values, Beglov singled out the need to protect children from what he described as the imposition of an unnatural sexual identity (Radio Svoboda, 2024). These views are widely shared by government and community figures. The campaign to protect Russia's traditional values translates into anti-Western propaganda, according to which the war in Ukraine is a broader struggle against the culturally decadent hegemony of America and the West (President of Russia, 2022).

In this ideological war, Russia does not claim to stand entirely on its own. At the same time that it promotes a multipolar world order, Russia emphasizes its alignment with a group of nations that advocate conservative values (Druyan Feldman and Mil-Man, 2023b). Extreme nationalists such as Aleksandr Dugin have long advanced the idea of a moral, anti-liberal bloc, and mainstream government officials have recently begun to express similar sentiments. "Most countries in the world," asserted Dmitry Medvedev—former president and prime minister, and currently Putin's deputy in the

Security Council and the military-industrial committee—"have remained loyal to traditional spiritual and moral values and to the norms of universal morality" (Edinaia Rossiia, 2024). Along the same lines, in August 2024, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova claimed that a wave of European citizens was relocating to Russia for the purpose of "saving their children from gender reassignment (*pereinachivanie*) and protecting their families" (Tsargrad, 2024). As Zakharova explained it, this relocation reflects the opposition of many Europeans to the liberal ideology of the West, as well as their longing for a place where traditional family values are preserved.

Among the measures implemented was the introduction of "family management" as a new subject in Russian schools as of September 1, 2024. Textbooks and instructional materials are being developed for this course, which focuses on the moral foundations and social significance of family life.

Measures for Promoting the Ideal Family Model

The government advances its vision of the ideal family in various ways. These include holidays and observances, along with propaganda efforts in schools and institutions of higher education. An official Year of the Family was declared in 2024, with directives to all relevant governmental bodies to allocate resources for the preservation of the family unit, as well as the establishment of a special committee under Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova to promote the year's objectives. Among the measures implemented was the introduction of "family management" as a new subject in Russian schools as of September 1, 2024. Textbooks and instructional materials are being developed for this course, which focuses on the moral foundations and social significance of family life. As part of the curriculum, students meet with "exemplary"

couples who share their experiences and with medical personnel who discourage voluntary childlessness (Kommersant, 2024). Not surprisingly, the topics of sex education and family planning are excluded.

Cinema and state-controlled television also promote the ideal family. The television series *Big Family*, whose twelve episodes were produced with government support and broadcast in 2024, sports the slogan “A large family is a superpower.” The film *Mother’s Letter*, which premiered in October 2024 with funding from the Orthodox Spas channel, focuses on two women who are struggling with the question of whether to have an abortion. Ultimately, against all odds, both choose to continue their pregnancies. The film includes medical footage of abortions as well as interviews with women who had considered the procedure but decided against it. Notably, the struggle these women experience is framed as a choice between the preservation of life on the one hand and personal convenience on the other—the latter portrayed as an expression of selfishness. The slant is already obvious in the way that representatives of Spas characterize their product. The film, they say, aims to answer two central questions: “How can we prevent the murder of babies?” and “Why is parenthood a source of happiness rather than a burden?” Boris Korchevnikov, CEO of Spas, draws a link to the war in Ukraine: the film involves an equivalent “internal war” over the souls of young people. If abortions had not been performed and if people had embraced traditional values, Korchevnikov argues, the physical war on the battlefield would never have broken out (Batanogov, 2024).

Putin has also reinstated a tradition that dates from 1944, when the Soviet Union was contending with the heavy human losses of World War II. This is the conferral of the “Heroic Mother” medal to women who have raised ten children, whether biological or adopted. The award is both ceremonial and financial: Putin personally confers the medal, and awardees receive a one-time payment of one million

rubles. The general population also has access to financial benefits that are meant to encourage large families, but demographers contend that these incentives are insufficient to increase fertility rates (Zubik, 2024).

The idealization of the Russian family has had a particularly dark side in Russian-occupied territories. Since February 2022, evidence has accumulated that Ukrainian children are being abducted and transferred to the Russian Federation for re-education and adoption by Russian families (President of Ukraine, 2022). As of June 2024, reports indicate that nearly 200,000 children have been affected, forcibly removed from institutions such as orphanages and hospitals as well as from areas of active combat. These children undergo a process of Russification aimed at erasing their Ukrainian identity; their ties with their biological families are severed, and they are placed for adoption by Russian families whom the authorities deem suitable (Fronek et al., 2024).⁷ Comments about the West’s moral corruption of children, such as those cited above by St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, suggest that these abductions have an ideological dimension. Beyond its punitive nature, its contribution to the Russification of Ukrainian society, and its mitigation of Russia’s demographic crisis, the forced transfer of Ukrainian children into ideal Russian families is seen to be a moral act—a rescue of innocents from the moral decay that stems from the West’s liberal policies on sexuality and gender.

Summary

In recent years, the Russian ideal of the family has undergone a process of cultural shaping and become a cornerstone of the country’s identity. The Russia-Ukraine war has served as a catalyst in this development.

The new family ideal is structured around two core elements: a large number of children and a heterosexual marriage. A pronatalist campaign has involved extensive propaganda,

economic incentives, and increasing restrictions on divorce and abortion. Traditional gender roles, which position women primarily as child-bearers and caregivers, are glorified as both natural and morally correct, and the LGBTQ community has been condemned and marginalized.

The targeting of women who do not conform to the model, and, even more so, the characterization of the LGBTQ community as politically disloyal, demonstrate that Putin's family ideal has become a tool for repressive domestic policies. The same ideological war is being waged through Russia's abduction of Ukrainian children. The transfer of approximately 200,000 children to Russian territory, often to so-called ideal Russian families, seems to be more than a question of Russia's demographic needs or interest in punishing or Russifying the Ukrainian population. The brutal policy is apparently understood, in addition, as a way to protect children from moral degradation.

Putin's conception of the family has become a key part of the ideological framework that his regime uses to justify its war against Ukraine. Russia considers itself to be fighting in the name of the traditional values that define its own identity and that the countries of the West undermine. Under Putin, the family institution has assumed a significant role in both domestic and foreign policy.

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The Question Nobody's Asking: Is it Even Possible to Rehabilitate* the Gaza Strip Under Existing Conditions, and if Not, What Then?

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After each round of violent clashes between Israel and Hamas, the issue of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip and improving its economic situation is raised once again. The accepted working assumption is that given suitable political conditions, and in the framework of a political process based on an attempt to promote the realization of the two-state paradigm, in which the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are considered one political and territorial unit under the control of the Palestinian Authority, it will be possible to rehabilitate the Strip. But it appears that nobody has ever asked if the Gaza Strip can indeed be rehabilitated.

In this paper I will try to clarify the meaning of “rehabilitation” in the context of the Gaza Strip, and with the aid of a matrix of variables—those that facilitate rehabilitation and those that disrupt it—examine a number of basic questions dealing with the actual feasibility of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip under existing conditions. Following that, with reference to my conclusion regarding the absence of sufficient conditions for a successful rehabilitation process, I will describe the characteristics of this state of affairs and its ramifications, and propose a number of possible options for dealing with the emerging situation in the absence of rehabilitation, with an emphasis on the importance of adopting logical guidelines which do not currently exist but which are here deemed to be essential for the success of such a process.

The conclusion of this paper is that leaving Hamas in the Gaza Strip as a ruling entity and with their commitment to the preservation of the idea of armed resistance, are both strongly disruptive variables, and both are endogenous to the Palestinian system. Therefore, without neutralizing these two variables, or at least weakening them very considerably, it is hard to imagine that the rehabilitation process will succeed.

Key words: Gaza Strip, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, the two-state solution, the Gaza Strip rehabilitation process.

Introduction: The Issue of Gaza Rehabilitation—an Ongoing Dilemma

The issue of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip has been on the agenda of political discussions and initiatives since June 2007,¹ when Hamas took control of the Strip, again after Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, and with even greater intensity at present, in view of the scale of the destruction following the fighting between Israel and Hamas after October 7, 2023.

After each round of violent clashes between Israel and Hamas, the issue of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip and improving its economic situation is raised once again. In each round of fighting, buildings and infrastructure are damaged and the economic distress and humanitarian situation in Gaza become more severe. Due to the basic reality of the fact that the Strip is controlled by a terror organization that is committed to destroying Israel, with the added problems of overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and chronic lack of power and water, the issue is once again on the regional and global agenda, with greater intensity. In all discussions, neither Hamas nor the Palestinians are called to account for their actions, and the matter of reconstruction is simply accepted as an essential need, devoid of any responsibility on the part of those who inspired the destruction by cultivating their military strength and by building the capabilities and the conditions for attacking Israel, while ignoring their responsibility for the development of the Strip and Palestinian society. Over the years, and particularly since 2014, enormous resources have been invested in efforts to restore buildings and infrastructure, and construct new facilities such as the desalination plant, solar fields and water and energy infrastructure. From 2021 Israel participated in efforts to achieve economic improvements by employing Gazan residents in Israel, while a few years earlier it had already granted significant relief in the rules of importing and exporting goods into and out of the Strip.

Research institutes and international organizations have invested considerable efforts in drawing up plans to rehabilitate Gaza, although most were never implemented. The accepted working assumption was that given suitable political conditions, and in the framework of a political process based on an attempt to promote the realization of the two-state paradigm, in which the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are considered one political and territorial unit under the control of the Palestinian Authority, it would be possible to rehabilitate the Strip. But it appears that nobody ever asked if the Gaza Strip could indeed be rehabilitated.

This fundamental question takes on even more significance given the unique political and security conditions, where not only is it impossible to treat the Gaza Strip and the West Bank as a single political and territorial unit under the control of the Palestinian Authority, but there is also a situation of two rival Palestinian entities led by two competing leaderships, who have been unable to bridge the significant gaps between them since 2007. Even more seriously, since gaining power in the Strip in June 2007, Hamas has developed into a hostile, dangerous and violent semi-political entity, [which has built a terrorist army and infrastructure](#) with the aim of realizing its vision of destroying Israel. Hamas pursued its military aim systematically and thoroughly at the expense of the welfare of Gaza residents, choosing military strength over a functioning economy, civil society and national infrastructures whose purpose is to serve the citizens and implement responsible sovereignty. Over the years Hamas became [part of the Iranian axis](#) and shared Iran's strategic vision of destroying Israel. Hamas was supported by Iran with money, armaments, training, technology and knowledge, and Iran was its full partner in the planning of the October 7, 2023 attack as the first stage in a long-term plan which it believed would lead to the erosion and eventual destruction of Israel by means of a continuous and intense war of attrition on

multiple fronts. It is true that Hamas surprised Iran and Hezbollah by not sharing the timing of its attack with them, but following the [seizure of thousands of documents](#) in the course of the Swords of Iron War, it became absolutely clear that Iran was not only aware of the plan but was a full partner in the planning and preparations.

The situation in the Gaza Strip after October 7 is the most difficult and complex that the region has experienced since 1948. The [scale of the devastation is huge](#) and the majority of the population is living in humanitarian shelters. Since its population comprises about two million people (based on data indicating the [migration of about 200,000 people](#) since the start of the war and the [death of about 45,000](#), according to reports from the Palestinian Ministry of Health in the Strip), and in the absence of a functioning central government, infrastructures and natural resources, in addition to the lack of employment as well as limited options for migration, the issue of rehabilitation becomes far more complex, costly and prolonged, assuming that it is even possible.

To these challenging basic conditions must be added the security issue, with respect to Israel and the lessons it has learned about the region and the threats expected to emerge in the future. Apart from that, every move or effort to rebuild the Strip struggles under the heavy political shadow cast by the linkage of Gaza to the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority, and the ability of the PA to assume sovereignty in the Gaza Strip. The problem only gets worse when the international community and countries of the region, particularly those that are supposed to provide the driving force and the infrastructure for the reconstruction project, make their willingness to join in the task conditional upon an invitation from the Palestinian Authority and its active participation in the process. All this in a situation where the two-state paradigm that was so familiar to us until October 7 is no longer valid, in terms of [public support on both sides](#) for the idea and the degree of trust both populations place in

this option, and it therefore [requires updating](#) in the spirit of the post-October 7 reality.

In addition, the rift between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas is still alive. All attempts at reconciliation since 2007 have failed. December 2024 witnessed the collapse of [an apparent agreement](#) between the two sides on the establishment of a technocratic committee to take over the running of the Gaza Strip and its post-war reconstruction. Consequently, in the absence of sufficient support and legitimacy for the two-state concept at this time on both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides, and since the PA is unable to assume the burden of implementing the idea by guaranteeing a stable and functioning Palestinian state, one that is ready to live alongside Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, any determined attempt to steer the process of Gaza rehabilitation as part of a two-state solution under the leadership of the Palestinian Authority is doomed to failure.

In this paper I will try to clarify the very meaning of the concepts of “reconstruction of the Gaza Strip” or “a rehabilitated Gaza Strip,” with reference to a number of basic questions concerning the actual feasibility of rehabilitating the Strip under existing conditions, and to present logical guidelines for the process which do not currently exist but are here deemed to be essential for the success of the rehabilitation process. Following that, with reference to my conclusion regarding the absence of sufficient conditions for the rehabilitation process, I will describe the characteristics of this state of affairs and its ramifications, and propose a number of possible options for dealing with the emerging situation in the absence of rehabilitation.

What Does “Rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip” Mean, and Related Questions

The first question that must be asked is: What does the statement “rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip” or “rehabilitated Gaza” mean? And there are many other questions also waiting for answers:

Figure 1. Components and Measures of Rehabilitation

Source: Reuters – Extent of the destruction in the Shajaya district to the east of Gaza City after the Israeli forces announced the end of a two-week military campaign (July 11, 2024)

1. What are the factors that facilitate or encourage rehabilitation?
2. What are the factors that inhibit or disrupt rehabilitation?
3. What is the intensity of each factor (high or low)?
4. Are each of the inhibiting or disruptive factors, the helpful or facilitating factors, endogenous or exogenous to the Palestinian system?
5. Is it even possible to rehabilitate Gaza in the present conditions?
6. If the Strip cannot be rehabilitated, what situation will emerge?
7. What is the significance and what are the implications of this situation?
8. How should these consequences be handled?

With reference to questions 1-4 a matrix of factors will be constructed (see below) to help with the analysis and assessment of the responses.

The Nature of Rehabilitation—What is the Meaning of “Rehabilitated Gaza”?

In the [professional literature](#) dealing with rehabilitation of failed states or disaster areas, the process is usually described as one of taking control of the territory, in order to create or rebuild the minimum physical infrastructures and social services that will serve as the spearhead to bring about social change through reforms in the political, economic, social and security spheres. The ultimate achievement is to enable self-rule (since the literature is essentially western, functioning self-rule usually implies liberal democratic governance), a functioning economy, security and social order which are not dependent on external financial aid or military support. It is important to stress that even when we rely on the accepted definitions in the literature, rehabilitation does not only refer to the physical aspect. It must also necessarily consider issues of society, law and

order, security and the economy. The concept must therefore be tackled in a holistic manner, encompassing many dimensions.

In the case of the Gaza Strip, we need a relevant and agreed definition for the nature and purpose of the rehabilitation: **The purpose must be to turn the Gaza Strip into a sustainable, functioning, responsible, non-subversive entity that strives for stability, with the potential and motivation to work towards economic development for the welfare of its residents.**

Expressions of joy and ecstasy after the October 7 atrocities were seen in the streets of most towns in Gaza, and although support for Hamas and the murderous attack has declined, the movement is still widely popular, together with support for the October attack and the continuation of the armed struggle against Israel.

The elements of housing, infrastructure and even economy are expressions of the physical aspect of the rehabilitation process. Even if they are technically complex, and even if they require resources of time and money, such as the removal of huge amounts of building debris (some of which could perhaps be used to extend the land available for living in the Strip into the sea) and unexploded ordnance, as well as the development of the local economy, these problems are essentially solvable and do not constitute a disruptive element for any future reconstruction process. They are the easiest ones to implement, if a response can be found for the three less concrete but more important dimensions: security, society, and government/institutions, which are the focus of this section.

The security aspect is an essential basic component without which rehabilitation is not possible. Ensuring a stable and secure environment requires the complete dismantling of both the political and the military wings of Hamas. Unless the organized political and military capabilities of Hamas are destroyed,

there is not a single entity, either within the Gaza Strip or outside it, including the Palestinian Authority, that will agree to enter the Strip and develop an alternative government. And without an alternative to Hamas rule it will not be possible to rehabilitate political institutions or to enforce law and order in the territory. In the absence of these elements, there is no way of focusing on building the economy, infrastructures or the society, nor of creating a response to the housing shortage that has been exacerbated by the war.

Social rehabilitation—the collective psychological component: The discourse on rehabilitation focuses largely on infrastructure aspects, including housing, and on financial and institutional aspects, but there is little talk of social rehabilitation, which is a basic condition for the success of any process. Gaza lacked a developed, vital and functioning civil society even before the war, and certainly after it. The war has been a traumatic event that has severely damaged any cohesion that existed in Palestinian society in Gaza, which was weak in any case. Hamas arose from [within Palestinian society](#) and was supported by most of the population. Expressions of joy and ecstasy after the October 7 atrocities were seen in the streets of most towns in Gaza, and although support for Hamas and the murderous attack has declined, [the movement is still widely popular, together with support for the October attack and the continuation of the armed struggle against Israel.](#)

The [psychological infrastructure of the Palestinian collective in Gaza](#), which rests on the ethos of refugee status, the right of return, continuation of the armed struggle against Israel, support for Hamas and the goal of destroying Israel, now has an additional layer of anger, offense and the desire for vengeance. This updated psychological basis feeds the idea of the struggle against Israel, and while it persists it will be impossible to recruit the Palestinian people for the long and exhausting process of historical rehabilitation in the spirit

of the defined aim. The test of the concept of the ongoing struggle will be seen, inter alia, in the degree of commitment and priority given to the reconstruction of the refugee camps (for if the camps are reconstructed as such, their residents' identity continues to be that of refugees waiting for Israel's defeat, while the refugees' integration into normative housing would indicate a forward-looking perspective not entirely focused on the struggle for Israel's destruction).

The scale of the destruction offers a historical opportunity to completely eliminate the refugee camps in the framework of planning the rehabilitation of Gaza's towns. The [continuation of UNRWA's activity](#) and any significant involvement of the UN in the process will not be helpful in this context, but rather the opposite, and so it is important to ensure that these bodies are not part of the process. The complete demolition of the refugee camps and their replacement with new towns and villages is part of the necessary healing process for Palestinian society in Gaza and elsewhere. Such a move could be the catalyst to reshape the Palestinian ethos and undermine the idea of the struggle. If some of the resources for the reconstruction of Gaza are directed towards rebuilding the refugee camps, awareness of the struggle will be nurtured and become a disruptive and inhibiting factor in any process of rehabilitation.

The government-institutional component:

Reconstruction of Gaza will require enormous resources, with estimates ranging from 80 to 100 billion dollars, but we must assume that the rich Gulf countries and the international community will be unwilling to sign up to efforts to raise the money in the absence of sufficient certainty regarding the chances of success, and above all the chances for long term stability. A high level of certainty can only be created on condition that Hamas is no longer a viable ruling or military entity and is replaced by a credible alternative. It is reasonable to assume that any countries that are willing

to join the reconstruction effort, particularly the Arab countries, will make their assistance conditional on the active involvement of the Palestinian Authority in the process, and even on an official invitation from the PA. Moreover, any alternative government that is established must include a local Palestinian component, since the local population and leadership must be part of the reconstruction process. [International experience shows](#) that without the participation of the local population, any attempt to impose an external model of governance or rehabilitation is destined to fail.

Since its establishment, the Palestinian Authority has shown no ability to function as a responsible and accountable state entity and its entrenchment as a failed, corrupt and in some cases terror-supporting organization means that it cannot be entrusted with the sole authority to manage the reconstruction process in the Gaza Strip.

On the other hand, the experience of the Oslo process years shows that full authority and responsibility for the rehabilitation process cannot be entirely entrusted to the Palestinians, the Palestinian Authority or any other Palestinian governing option. Since its establishment, the Palestinian Authority has shown no ability to function as a responsible and accountable state entity and its entrenchment as a [failed, corrupt](#) and in some cases terror-supporting organization means that it cannot be entrusted with the sole authority to manage the reconstruction process in the Gaza Strip. It is entirely beyond its ability to execute a task of this scale. Therefore, any Palestinian leadership included in the alternative to Hamas rule will need to establish a regional, international or combination task force, that will have responsibility for the reconstruction process by virtue of a defined and agreed mandate. Governing powers in the Gaza Strip should be transferred to Palestinian governance in a very gradual, responsible, and controlled manner,

subject to progress in the reconstruction process and over a number of years.

To sum up, the main essential conditions for rehabilitation are): The wishes of the population and the leadership for rehabilitation, giving priority to rehabilitation over everything else, and the removal of the idea of struggle against Israel (including dismantling the refugee camps); a legitimate, committed, responsible and functioning leadership (which does not have to be popular); calm in terms of security; the potential for a developing civil society; social unity and mechanisms for effective healing of social fragmentation; resources; planning; assistance and control by external elements.

Disruptive and Facilitating Factors that Affect the Rehabilitation Process

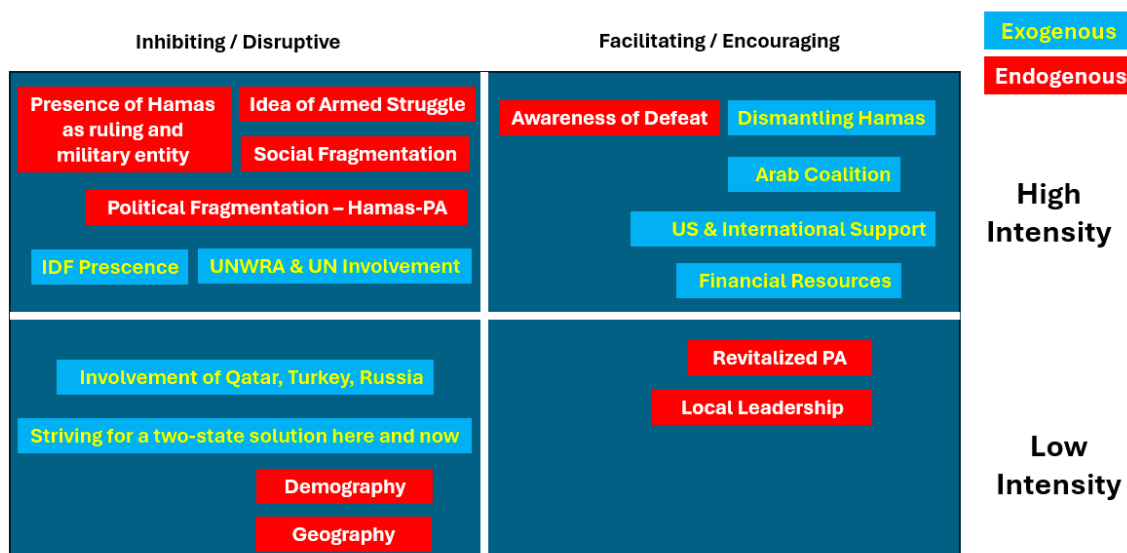
The rehabilitation process will naturally be affected by a long list of variables or factors, some external (exogenous) to the Palestinian system and the Gaza Strip, and some internal (endogenous). Some of these variables promote the process or facilitate it, while others disrupt or even thwart the process, and the influence of each variable differs in intensity. For the purpose of presenting and analyzing the challenges, the variables are displayed by means of a matrix of external and internal factors that also shows

the intensity of each one, in a binary division between strong and weak intensity. Obviously in reality the range of influences is broader, and between those at the strong end of the spectrum and those at the weak end, there are infinite values, but the matrix lays an analytical and conceptual foundation for planning the rehabilitation of Gaza, or at least increasing the chances of it happening.

The proposed matrix clearly shows that in the realm of high intensity facilitating factors, almost all of them are exogenous to the Palestinian system, while the majority of inhibiting or disruptive factors are endogenous. This means that special attention should be given to how the endogenous factors are handled before embarking on the rehabilitation process. Unless initial positive results can be produced, it is hard to predict success for the process in general, even given a very strong regional and international effort.

There is a further fundamental condition which is defined as external to the Palestinian system and of high intensity as a facilitator of rehabilitation, and this is the complete removal of Hamas as a governing and military entity. Only Israel can ensure this condition, since it is clear that there is not even one other player, including the PA itself, that is willing and able to assume this task. This means that the war

Figure 2. Matrix of variables and their relative influence



in Gaza can only end after realization of [the war aim](#) defined by the Israeli government—dismantling Hamas. If the war ends before this is achieved, genuine rehabilitation will not be possible.

And yet this fundamental condition is not sufficient. A further essential condition is to shatter the Palestinian idea of struggle, or at least weaken it and transform it into a wish for rehabilitation, stability, security, and [acceptance of the existence of Israel](#)—giving up the armed struggle, the ethos of living as refugees and the right of return. These moves would mark the start of a [vital deradicalization process](#), which will take years.

Complementary to this condition is the release from the historical and unrealistic adherence to the two-state paradigm in its familiar format of the last three decades. Stubbornly clinging to this paradigm and presenting it as a condition for the rehabilitation process will undermine and even prevent the process from starting. The paradigm in its historical format had never reached maturity, [but the events of October 7 turned the Israeli public away from the concept and the collective national consciousness was deeply affected in a way that aroused strong opposition to the idea. A reflection of this picture can be found among the Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and even more strongly in East Jerusalem.](#)

The proposed matrix also contains factors defined as disruptive, whether of high intensity or low intensity, presented as negatives. The idea is that by their very presence these factors can disrupt the process, so to prevent their negative influence, it is important to ensure they are not part of the rehabilitation. For example, they include the UN and UNRWA, which over the years and more so since October 7, have become very problematical, due to their inbuilt bias against Israel, and above all because of their cooperation with Hamas terror and [their historical contribution to perpetuating the conflict](#) through methodical indoctrination of the ethos of refugee status and the right

of return, alongside the ethos of the armed struggle. Qatar and Turkey, [two typically Hamas-supporting countries](#), have worked and continue to work to maintain the status of Hamas as the most prominent and influential force in the Palestinian arena. Their participation in the rehabilitation process would interfere with the need to weaken the remnants of Hamas in Gaza and the start of the deradicalization process.

The revitalization of the Palestinian Authority by means of significant reforms ([RPA](#)) and the growth of local leadership in Gaza are two factors of great importance to the success of the process. While the intensity of their influence has been classified as low when compared to other facilitating factors, they are clearly crucial and necessary. Yet in the existing situation and the foreseeable future, it appears that the likelihood of reform of the PA and the growth of legitimate and functioning local leadership in the Gaza Strip is so low as to be negligible.

The Reality in the Absence of Rehabilitation

In the absence of rehabilitation and assuming that Israel will prefer not to conquer the Gaza Strip and impose military rule on it, even temporarily, in order to create suitable conditions for the establishment of an alternative to Hamas and the start of the process, it is possible to envisage two scenarios of differing probability.

IDF presence in the Strip: This is the more likely scenario, with IDF forces continuing to maintain a presence in the Strip, along the Netzarim corridor and along the Philadelphi corridor, and probably also along a newly breached corridor that separates Gaza City from the area to the north—the areas of Jabaliya, Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Al-Atatra (this scenario is a relevant scenario in the case of a crisis in the current ceasefire and hostage agreement—the prediction is that the agreement will be breached and not fulfilled in its entirety).

Without IDF presence in the Strip: In the second scenario there is no IDF presence in the area, except along its borders. The likelihood

Figure 3. Map of the Gaza Strip and areas of IDF activity

Source: The Data Desk, Institute of National Security Studies

of this scenario is particularly low, assuming that a complete IDF withdrawal from the Gaza Strip would allow Hamas to rapidly reestablish itself and rebuild its military strength, renewing the security threat. Overcoming this threat would require a further military operation, or alternatively, routine forays by the IDF into Hamas power centers in the Strip, with the support of the civilian population.

Therefore we will focus on the first scenario, assuming that the most prominent features of the emerging situation will be as follows: A depopulated northern area (north of Gaza City); most of the population living in the Mawasi humanitarian and shelter area; Hamas as a partially functioning governing entity in the southern part of the Strip; humanitarian distress; protest against Hamas leading to subversion and power struggles; a descent into general chaos.

Consequences of a Situation Without Rehabilitation

The consequences of a failure to rehabilitate Gaza will be problematic and complex, both in relation to Israel and in relation to other players

and regional stability. Without rehabilitation the humanitarian problems will become more severe, and in the absence of alternatives to humanitarian aid arriving from Egypt and distributed by international organizations, at some stage Israel will become responsible for the supply of humanitarian aid, and this will inevitably lead to friction in the face of terror attacks and relatively low intensity guerrilla fighting, with periodical outbreaks of higher intensity. Israel will face mounting international pressure and could encounter problems in its relations with Egypt and Jordan, and with the Abraham Accords countries. In addition and perhaps more seriously, the situation could damage relations with the American administration and other friends in the West. It would also reduce the likelihood of progress in the process of normalization with Saudi Arabia, and probably also have an adverse effect on the stability of the Palestinian Authority and the level of violent friction in the West Bank. Apart from all that, there is a very real possibility that a situation of ongoing violent friction will also affect the situation inside Israel, and could make the social and political rifts in Israel wider

Figure 4: Options in the absence of rehabilitation

Northern Gaza (north of Gaza City) as an unpopulated buffer zone with **partial military government**—in the area between Gaza City and Netzarim, with the whole area south of the expanded Netzarim corridor under local management—probably Hamas. Humanitarian aid in the existing format until the Rafah Crossing is operated by a Palestinian element under international supervision and with full transparency to Israel, and from then on, all humanitarian aid to come through Egypt, and Israel to cut off all contact with the southern part of the Strip.



Partial and limited control: Northern Gaza (north of Gaza City) as an unpopulated buffer zone, relocating the Netzarim corridor as a corridor that separates Gaza City from the area to its north, while the area south of the corridor is under local management. The IDF remains in the Philadelphi corridor.

Full military administration over the whole Strip: With two options, ongoing or limited, for the purpose of preparing the ground for the arrival of a task force to build an alternative to Hamas rule and start the rehabilitation process.

and deeper, as well as creating pressure on the economy due to the direct military costs of tackling the violence, the costs of reservists, the costs of transferring humanitarian aid, and the possible costs of setting up a military administration.

Options for Israel in the Absence of Rehabilitation

In the absence of rehabilitation, even in a gradual, lengthy process, and given the greater probability of an ongoing IDF presence in the Gaza Strip, because of the high risk embodied in the alternative of an IDF withdrawal to the border areas of the Strip, it is realistic to focus on the first scenario. In this case, there are three main options, where the common denominator is Israeli military control together with operation of the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing by a non-Hamas Palestinian element, under close international supervision and with full transparency for the Israeli side. The difference

between the options lies in the extent of military control and the presence or non-presence of the IDF in the Philadelphi corridor area.

All three options, with the emphasis on the full military government option, can be ongoing or limited in time, subject to circumstances and developments. It would be correct for Israel to aim for time-restricted military government and use this period to prepare the ground for the development of a civilian alternative to Hamas rule, as an essential condition for embarking on the comprehensive rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip. The military administration will define its objective as the complete eradication of Hamas as a sovereign entity in Gaza, will accept responsibility for the supply of humanitarian aid—even if not directly and through cooperation with aid organizations operating on the ground or private security companies—, and will deprive Hamas of vital oxygen and an effective platform from which to control the civilian population. Subject to

gradual IDF withdrawal from the territory, the resulting conditions will make it possible to transfer Hamas-free, secure areas to the control of a technocratic Palestinian administration, accompanied by a regional-international task force until the process is complete. By that time there will be no Israeli military presence in the whole of the Gaza Strip, which will be run by the Palestinian administration with the support of the aforesaid task force, and rehabilitation will proceed without the presence of Hamas.

Yet Perhaps Rehabilitation is Possible After All? The Logical Guidelines to be Adopted

In view of the cost of dispensing with rehabilitation, and assuming there are initial signs of restraining the negative influence of endogenic factors on the Palestinian system, it is important to adopt a number of essential principles for any option chosen as the way forward to rehabilitation of Gaza.

Putting a Palestinian element in charge of the reopened crossing also sends an important message to the Palestinians about the possibility of manifesting their responsibility and commitment to the process and to the future independence of the Gaza Strip.

The first principle is **gradual progress**. The extent of the destruction and the size of the challenge mean that the process of rehabilitation cannot start at once over the whole of the Gaza Strip. It will be necessary to work in a limited number of territorial cells defined as secure bubbles, and advance from bubble to bubble. The recommendation is to start in the north or in the south of the Strip—in the Rafah area next to the border—, since these areas are fairly sparsely populated and it will be possible to operate with relative freedom, speed and safety. The civilian population will return to the rebuilt areas in a controlled and gradual process to facilitate their orderly absorption.

The whole process of rehabilitation in each cell must start with the complete **demolition of the refugee camps**, and prevention of their reconstruction in that format. Rebuilding the refugee camps means adding fuel to the concept of the struggle, which will distract the Palestinian public, its leadership and all partners in the work from the efforts to achieve rehabilitation and the logic of the process. Therefore, as explained above, it is essential to ensure that UNRWA does not resume its role in Gaza, and that the UN plays no part in the process.

Operation of the Rafah crossing by a non-Hamas Palestinian entity, subject to the most stringent security requirements and complete transparency to Israel, is essential to the rehabilitation process. The Rafah crossing is where it is possible to transfer large quantities of raw materials and humanitarian aid quickly and efficiently. Putting a Palestinian element in charge of the reopened crossing also sends an important message to the Palestinians about the possibility of manifesting their responsibility and commitment to the process and to the future independence of the Gaza Strip.

Barring countries that support Hamas: Countries that support Hamas cannot be involved in the rehabilitation process, since their presence will increase the difficulties of promoting deradicalization or de-Hamasification in the Strip. Qatar and Turkey wish to preserve the status of Hamas as an influential element in the Palestinian arena, so it can be assumed that they will interfere with any deep and thorough reform of Gaza. Russia and China are also likely to disrupt the process, whether because of the support they have shown for Hamas over the years, including during the period since October 7, 2023, or for considerations of their position as revisionist powers that seek to undermine American hegemony in the existing world order. They could exploit their participation in the rehabilitation process as a lever to weaken American influence, which is essential as the spearhead of a regional coalition based on Saudi

Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan as the essential partners, together with other members of the international community, with the emphasis on some leading European countries such as Germany, France and Italy.

The involvement of the local population in the rehabilitation process, through legitimate leadership, is vital. The people must be part of the process and able to influence it. International experience of rebuilding regions of conflict and failing states demonstrates the importance of bringing in the local population rather than engineering solutions and imposing them from above. Involving the people helps to prevent reservations or opposition to reforms, provides sources of employment, encourages commitment, and above all creates a sense of community and ownership of the process and its outcomes.

Summary

During January 2025, ahead of the inauguration of President Trump on January 20, there was a stronger push to mediate between Israel and Hamas and to complete negotiations on the release of the hostages and an end to the war; an agreement was indeed signed and implementation began on January 19. The agreement also refers to the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, which will begin in the third stage, and the working assumption of those involved in the negotiations appears to be that the Gaza Strip can indeed be rehabilitated under existing conditions and those that will be created by the signing of the agreement.

The working assumption regarding the feasibility of rehabilitating the Strip under the familiar, existing conditions, with the emphasis on leaving Hamas in place as the governing entity, even if weakened, was not validated either before or during the negotiations. In fact, it appears that nobody has asked whether it is indeed possible to rehabilitate Gaza in these circumstances, or alternatively, what are the essential conditions for any successful rehabilitation.

My purpose in this paper was to tackle this question, under the assumption of a continuation of Hamas rule. In order to examine the question, I mapped out a range of variables that will affect any rehabilitation process. The variables were classified as either facilitating or inhibiting/ disrupting the process, and ranked by the intensity of their influence. They were also defined as either exogenous or endogenous to the Palestinian system. The variables were thus organized into a matrix, which serves as an analytical tool for examining the fundamental question of the feasibility of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip. The conclusion I reached is that the Gaza Strip—given the existing conditions and the continuation of Hamas rule, or its survival as a functioning organization, even in a weakened state compared to its position before October 7, 2025, with the psychology of the Palestinian collective based on the ethos of opposition and refugee status, which means the consciousness of struggle—cannot be rehabilitated.

The continued presence of Hamas in Gaza as a governing entity or even as an unofficial organization, and the consciousness of struggle, are defined as very strong disruptive variables, and both are endogenous to the Palestinian system. Without neutralizing these two factors, or at least significantly weakening them, it is hard to be hopeful that any rehabilitation process will succeed. It must therefore be assumed that even a successful conclusion to the negotiations, that have been conducted with extra vigor since the start of January 2025, which leaves these two variables in place, will not pave the way for a genuine process of rehabilitation in the Gaza Strip.

Notwithstanding the feasibility of President Trump's vision regarding the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip after enabling the Palestinian residents to leave the Strip, his announcement is an important nod to the understanding that Gaza cannot be reconstructed under the current conditions and with the presence of Hamas. Trump's declarations in this regard are no less than an earthquake and a paradigmatic shift that

acknowledges the necessary and reasonable criteria for the reconstruction of Gaza.

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- * The term rehabilitation has been chosen as it contains the broader context of the challenge of rejuvenating Gaza, whereas “reconstruction” refers mainly to the physical dimension of the process. Due to the multi-dimensional nature of Gaza’s path to recovery, which

includes crucial societal aspects, we prefer to use “rehabilitation” and not “reconstruction.”

Notes

- 1 For example:

[Udi Dekel & Anat Kurtz: Rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip – An urgent need](#)

[Michael Harari: It is essential to start thinking even now about a strategic outline for the rehabilitation of Gaza](#)

[Planning the post-war reconstruction and recovery of Gaza](#)

[Supporting the Gaza reconstruction mechanism](#)

[Palestinian perspectives on the reconstruction of Gaza](#)



Israel's National Security Concept: Functional Incoherence and the October 7 Disaster

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The October 7, 2023, attack recharged discussions surrounding Israel's national security concept. This article claims that the national security concept consists of three interwoven layers—security doctrine, security strategy and military strategy (or operational concept in the Israeli jargon)—and that their misalignment is a prominent reason that led to Israel's failure. Accordingly, the article attempts to present a partial answer to why the October 7 failure occurred, unlike the investigations so far, which address what happened and not why. The author argues that the renewed discussion of this issue does not distinguish clearly enough between the national security concept per se and its implementation through security decision-making. The principles of the existing national security concept were relevant enough to successfully cope with the October 7 attack, and the failure resulted from how they were applied in practice by both the political echelon and the military leadership. The article presents and analyzes the three layers of the national security concept and their misalignment in the years before October 7, 2023, and examines the corrections needed to improve decision-making processes and the functional coherence of the national security concept.

Keywords: Security concept, security doctrine, security strategy, military strategy, grand strategy, strategic assessment, military strategy, operational plans, multi-year force buildup plan

Introduction

Following the October 7 attack and the subsequent Swords of Iron War, there is renewed interest in Israel's national security concept. We can identify several different approaches to this renewed interest:

- An approach that focuses the discussion mainly on the operational level, with an emphasis on the deficiencies that were revealed in military intelligence and in Israel's

force buildup before the war. Proponents of this approach refer to the change needed in Israel's national security concept following the war, mainly in terms of investing significant resources to strengthen the IDF in preparation for the military challenges expected in future wars. The work of the [Nagel Commission](#) that presented recommendations on the security budget and force buildup for the upcoming



years represents a notable example of this approach .

- Another approach centers on the need to adapt the basic principles of the national security concept to current reality, with an emphasis on the deficiencies revealed before the war in [the Israeli deterrence concept](#) toward non-state actors.
- Others focus the discussion on the need to improve the political leadership's decision-making processes. One example is the [bill](#) proposed by Members of Knesset Gadi Eisenkot and Yuli Edelstein, which aims to require an incoming government to draft a written and approved national security strategy.
- Some [argue](#) that the problem lies in Israel's lack of an officially approved and up-to-date security concept, which makes it difficult to develop a security response to the challenges it faces.
- One approach that seeks to formulate a new national security concept that is adapted to the circumstances that led to October 7 and the results of the Swords of Iron War, is centered on ideas of [prevention](#), aggressive enforcement, and [acting like a regional power](#).

Behind the various approaches are implicit assumptions about the main failures that led to the October 7 disaster. There may also be other motivations for the approaches being developed on this issue. For example, focusing the discourse on the military-operational level could serve the political leadership's desire to reduce its portion of the blame for the events of October 7.

The premise of this article is that the national security concept consists of three different layers—**security doctrine, security strategy and military strategy**—that need to be aligned with one another. Before October 7, there was a lack of functional coherence between these layers, and this greatly undermined Israel's security response to the threats it faced. This article examines the content of the layers that

comprise Israel's national security concept and the gaps that developed between them.

The main conclusion that emerges from the analysis is that **central principles of Israel's existing security doctrine provided an appropriate response to its strategic circumstances on the eve of October 7 but were not applied appropriately across the different layers in the years preceding the attack**. In this context, the political leadership strayed from the basic principles of the security doctrine, particularly the principle of deterrence, did not maintain adequate control over the IDF's military strategy and failed to nurture the alignment and synchronization needed between the three layers of the national security concept. The IDF's military strategy also deviated from the pillars of the security doctrine and in practice, undermined the balance between the layers and operated according to a logic that was not consistent with the security doctrine and was not discussed in depth with the political leadership.

To restore its national security following the Swords of Iron War, Israel must maintain and develop the basic principles of its security doctrine, create alignment between the security strategy and military strategy layers and thus create the necessary coherence in the national security concept as a whole. Furthermore, the acquisition of military nuclear capabilities by Iran will require the adaptation of Israel's national security concept to this reality. Most of the responsibility for this lies with the political leadership, and it needs to significantly improve its decision-making process and oversight of security issues.

Conceptual Framework

The national security concept is not a precise prescription for coping with every security challenge but an overall framework for creating a general security response to the State of Israel's fundamental security condition. This response should enable Israel, through specific

decision-making, to successfully address the range of challenges and crises it faces. The conceptual framework presented here is based on a differentiation between three inherently interconnected layers that together form the main principles of Israel's national security concept. Israel's national security concept is not formalized in an approved written document but exists as implicit guidelines that have developed since the 1950s.

The initial layer contains conceptual components developed to address Israel's fundamental security situation and the basic principles of the response at the strategic level. This is the layer of the **security doctrine**. The third layer is the functional layer—the **military strategy** of Israel's force build-up and the use of Israel's military force. The layer that connects these levels is the **security strategy**, which embodies the strategic preferences of the political leadership, along with decisions on short-term **security policy** based on current strategic-security assessments.

The Security Doctrine Layer

The security doctrine is an umbrella term for principles that underlie how Israel addresses its fundamental security problems. These principles, which are largely ongoing and fixed over time, reflect:

- Israel's national vision, such as building a national home for the Jewish people; the aspiration for peace; the desire for a connection with its regional neighbors; relations with the world; and the connection with Diaspora Jews.
- Defining the country's fundamental security conditions, such as addressing basic regional hostility; geographical and topographical asymmetry regional balance-of-power; and external involvement in the region.
- The basic principles of the national security approach, such as the overall security orientation, the division (according to Ben-Gurion) between "staying power" and "striking power," the architecture of the

security establishment, and the strategic outputs required.

These principles relate to the basic components that guide Israel's overall security approach and the military logic that is supposed to guide the activity of the political echelon and the military leadership in the other layers of the national security concept. Among other things, these basic components led the drafters of Israel's security concept to the conclusion that it was not possible to impose an end to the conflict with the Arabs through force and that Israel needed to stand firm over the long term until it was accepted into the region. Consequently, the country adopted an overall **defensive security strategy** that is executed through an **offensive military doctrine**. Israel's defensive security orientation entails the assumption that the Israeli-Arab conflict will need to be ultimately resolved through political measures based on Israel standing firm (the so-called "iron wall" security orientation) rather than on an overall military victory.

Israel's defensive security orientation entails the assumption that the Israeli-Arab conflict will need to be ultimately resolved through political measures based on Israel standing firm (the so-called "iron wall" security orientation) rather than on an overall military victory.

The security doctrine focuses on issues such as the mix between Israeli society's staying power, which is built up during periods of calm, and its offensive power in times of war; the need for basic deterrence and for a qualitative military, educational, and technological advantage; and high-quality national security decision-making, etc. The security doctrine also includes reference to fundamental principles derived from these basic components. These relate to questions such as the degree of Israel's security-military independence versus dependence on other countries; relevant *casus belli* and goals of war; Israel's security borders; the nature of

the connection with Diaspora Jews; issues of internal security and the treatment of minorities; and other issues on the conceptual-theoretical level.

Within this framework, the security doctrine layer also defines the strategic outputs defined by the political echelon to ensure Israel's security. The most well-known outputs are the three pillars specified by David Ben-Gurion: **deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory**, to which the [Meridor Committee](#) (2006) sought to add a fourth pillar—**defense, specifically from ballistic missiles and rocket threats**. The security doctrine defines the need to maintain these pillars to protect the State of Israel's security. In practice, **their implementation is dependent on the actions of the political echelon and military leadership in the layers of security strategy and military strategy**. The security doctrine defines the outputs needed for maintaining security, and the role of the other layers is to execute them in practice.

This underlines the necessity of alignment between the national security principles defined in the security doctrine and the actions taken in the other layers. My argument is that before the October 7 attack, **the three layers were not properly aligned**. While the principles of the security doctrine were valid and relevant to Israel's strategic reality, **they were not applied by the political echelon and the military leadership in the other more functional layers of the national security paradigm**. It should be emphasized that alignment or coherence between these layers in the context of deterrence, early warning, decisive victory, and defense is not a given; rather it requires continuous and consistent maintenance by the political echelon and security leadership.

The Security Strategy Layer

Security strategy is an umbrella term for the national security worldview of the incumbent government, along with its security policy in practice. This layer aims to address security

challenges in the short and medium term, to adapt to changing circumstances, and it to define more specific security steps needed to uphold the strategic outputs defined by the security doctrine. This layer serves as a bridge between the principles of the security doctrine and the layer of the military strategy.

As such, the security strategy layer includes several levels of thought and action. The first is the grand strategy of the political leadership, which embodies its worldview regarding how to address the country's security. The grand strategy encompasses the government's preferences for coping with security problems, based, among other things, on its political and policy preferences. Consequently, grand strategy tends to be replaced with changes of government or leaders. The second is its security policy that is determined periodically in the context of the evolving landscape of threats, opportunities, and resources in a given context, in order to advance security activity in accordance with the government's grand strategy and periodic strategic assessments, while attempting to align it with the strategic outputs determined in the security doctrine layer. The third is handling crises or urgent situations that require immediate decision-making.

To-date, Israel's governments have generally refrained from formulating an official grand strategy that would serve as a directive for political-security conduct during their term. The heavy burden of ongoing security problems encourages policymakers to focus on the day-to-day at the expense of formulating long-term strategic planning and systematic working practices. However, this preference is rooted not only in the immediate pressures of the present, but also in a strategic culture that favors a preoccupation with current affairs at the expense of grand strategic thinking.

There is no real limit on time, resources, or expertise for conducting grand strategic thinking, and in the security reality of the State of Israel, this has significant potential advantages. Grand strategic thinking can increase Israel's

room for maneuver by bringing up alternatives and policy directions across the entire range of considerations and options before the circumstances of reality harden and create the need to cope with urgent incidents and crisis-management resulting from them. However, the politicization that characterizes the decision-making process in Israel helps explain the insufficient investment in formulating such a strategy. Ideological considerations, with an emphasis on the Palestinian issue, prevent any real discussion of a range of specific strategic avenues from even getting off the ground.

In response to this missing layer, Members of Knesset Gadi Eisenkot and Yuli Edelstein are [proposing](#) a National Security Strategy bill, which addresses what is missing. According to the bill, the National Security Council (NSC), in consultation with government ministries and security agencies, will formulate a national security strategy that will be approved by an incoming government within 150 days of being formed and will subsequently be updated annually. The national security strategy will include an analysis of the foundations of the national security doctrine, including the strategic outputs needed to ensure Israel's security, challenges based on identified threats, capacities for attaining the national security objectives, an examination of weaknesses, and prioritization.

If the bill is approved, it will be able to reduce the ongoing gap in the security strategy layer, and give strategic direction to periodic strategic assessments in order to formulate specific security policy recommendations for the purpose of implementing the national security strategy. Eisenkot and Edelstein's bill intentionally links the government's grand strategy with the annual strategic assessment that the NSC is supposed to submit at least once a year to the Ministerial Committee on National Security (the Security Cabinet), according to the National Security Council Law from 2008. The bill states that this annual strategic assessment

will explicitly relate to the national security strategy (section 2 [6]).

The grand strategy and the government's annual strategic assessment are a substantive basis for guiding Israel's continuing security activity, but necessitates the maintenance of an ongoing decision-making process on national security issues. In light of the gaps of knowledge among Israel's political leadership on national security issues, in May 2016, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a committee headed by Major General (res.) Yaakov Amidror to examine ways to improve the work of the Security Cabinet and formulate recommendations on the issue. In May 2017, the Security Cabinet adopted the Amidror Committee's [report](#), which recommended dedicating resources to improving the learning and depth of understanding necessary for cabinet ministers, the need to make decisions with long-term significance in times of calm, and how to manage the cabinet during times of emergency or war. Despite several NSC proposals to improve the cabinet's work process following the report, there does not seem to have been significant improvement in the professionalism of the cabinet ministers either during times of calm or emergency.

In terms of Israel's overall national security concept, the most important single variable for improving national security is the quality of the country's strategic-security decision-making.¹ The security strategy layer is based on decision-making processes at various levels—grand strategy, annual and periodic strategic assessments, the work of the Security Cabinet, and consultations and discussions on current security issues. These processes together are supposed to provide a connection to and a foundation for the operational level executed by the various security agencies. This requires the political leadership to deepen its understanding of the relationship between strategic components and the operational layer of the IDF and the other security agencies.

The Military Strategy Layer

Military strategy is an umbrella term for the principles of force application, command and control, preparedness for routine and emergency situations, and the force buildup of the IDF and the security establishment. The military strategy of the IDF, as the main security force, should be derived from two parallel axes—the principles of the security doctrine layer and the strategic outputs defined in it, as well as from the security strategy layer—and should comprise the proposed way to implement them. This requires open dialogue between the military leadership and the political leadership, which is critical and must occur in a continuous and focused manner.

In practice, the political leadership has failed to guide the IDF with a long-term strategic perspective or to perform close supervision and control over its military strategy, including its operational plans, multi-year force buildup plans, and organizational changes that are included in them. In this situation, **the political leadership does not shape the IDF's main planning and operational processes through the security strategy layer, and in reality, a gap emerges between the layers of the national security concept, creating an imbalance between them.**

Exposure to operational plans only when they are about to be implemented does not allow the political leadership to influence their content due to time constraints. As a result, it is forced to approve them—whether or not they support the strategic objectives set by the military leadership for the operation or war.

A tangible and recent expression of the incoherence between the layers is the work of the [Nagel Commission for Evaluating the Security Budget and Force Buildup](#). It was appointed to review the IDF's military strategy and force buildup, including the allocation of the budget in light of the ongoing Swords of

Iron War. It did not, however, do so based on a coherent strategic concept but rather by bottom-up threat assessments and scenarios presented by security officials. As the commission itself attests, its work was not done in the context of Israel's overall national security concept: **"The overall national security concept** of the State of Israel was not presented to the commission and, by definition, it is the responsibility of the political leadership" (p. 17, emphasis in the original). In other words, even after the October 7 attack, the prime minister and the commission that he appointed still fail to recognize the necessity of coherence between the layers of the national security concept, implying that there is no need to connect them. Deep involvement and guidance from the political leadership regarding operational plans and force buildup is a necessity, especially for a country facing such serious threats as Israel. However, most members of the political leadership, including the ministers on the Security Cabinet, are not familiar with the IDF's operational plans and do not guide their preparation or assess their alignment with Israel's overall national security concept. **As a result, the military leadership is, in most cases, forced to determine strategic objectives on its own in order to guide its military operational planning.**² The necessary dialogue is not taking place, in which the construction of the IDF's operational plans are made based on strategic guidance from the political leadership.

Exposure to operational plans only when they are about to be implemented does not allow the political leadership to influence their content due to time constraints. As a result, it is forced to approve them—whether or not they support the strategic objectives set by the military leadership for the operation or war. In order to connect and synchronize between the layers, a different decision-making process is needed regarding the approval process of the IDF's operational plans. Within this context, the IDF must first present the strategic purpose of each plan to the political leadership, which

should then assess whether it aligns with the strategic goals that it wishes to achieve. Only after concluding this discussion should the IDF begin to plan the operational methods to achieve the goals and the designated purpose. Following this, the NSC should assess whether the actual planning aligns with the goals and the purpose and report its findings to the Security Cabinet. This dialogue between the political and military leadership surrounding operational plans must be ongoing and continuous.

With respect to force buildup, too, the political leadership needs to be well acquainted with the IDF's multi-year plans. Without such guidance and familiarity the political leadership will encounter strategic surprises, forcing it to manage war in ways it did not intend. Although the Security Cabinet officially approves the IDF's multi-year force buildup plans, they are generally presented for approval without prior strategic direction from the political leadership, and it is difficult to influence them once they have already been formulated within the IDF.

It should be emphasized that decisions regarding the IDF's force buildup are of great importance, as they have broad implications in a rigid system. Canceling weapon platforms or military units such as armored brigades have long-term impacts, and rebuilding them is a lengthy process—not only in terms of acquiring the platforms themselves but also in training, budgeting, ammunition stock levels, logistical handling, etc.

An example of the Security Cabinet's partial involvement in force buildup plans appears in the State Comptroller's February 2023 [report](#) on the force buildup of the armored-tank forces. According to the report, during the six years from 2016 to 2022, the competence-level of the reserve force, including the reserve armored-tank forces, was not presented to the government. This despite Section 3(a) of the Reserve Service Law, which stipulates that the government is responsible for determining the size of the reserve forces and assessing, at least once a year, based on the Minister of Defense's

recommendation, the need to change the size of the reserve forces.

Furthermore, even though the Security Cabinet approved the Gideon Multi-Year Plan for the years 2016-2020, in January 2019, the then new chief of staff, Aviv Kohavi decided to end the multi-year plan that year and to begin a new multi-year plan—Tnufa—in 2020. This occurred [without the direction or the approval of the political leadership](#), even though it included significant changes, such as the closure of tank brigades.

Another expression of the misalignment between the layers of the security concept is the practice of the IDF to formulate what is known as the IDF Strategy, which aims, among other things, to be a platform for dialogue with the political leadership in the absence of ongoing practical guidance from it. As Meir Finkel [wrote](#) (2020), the IDF Strategy documents,

...were written for the army's internal purposes and, therefore, were written in military language, using terminology that is partly unfamiliar to the political leadership and the public [...] moreover, the interface between the IDF's senior command and the political leadership regarding the approval of these documents was very limited, not due to the army's unwillingness to present them for discussion and approval, but due to Israel's longstanding tradition of lacking official national security documents. This tradition reflects the political leadership's clear preference not to commit to any specific concept and instead to approve what the army presents, even if only in general terms and retrospectively [...] we can say that this represents a deliberate disconnect of the political leadership from the military leadership, apparently in order to maintain the former's leeway, though some in the political

leadership have called for reducing this disconnect in recent years.

In practice, without close guidance and oversight from the political leadership regarding the military strategy of the IDF and the other security agencies, they are forced to develop and implement their own concepts. Meanwhile, in recent decades, the IDF itself has not ensured that its military strategy aligns with the principles of the security doctrine and has weakened its ability to provide elements of deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory as necessary. This situation creates a broad basis for incoherence in defining and achieving the requisite strategic outputs from the security doctrine layer. In the next section, I will attempt to illustrate the impact of the misalignment between the layers of the national security concept on meeting the strategic outputs required by the security doctrine layer.

Meanwhile, in recent decades, the IDF itself has not ensured that its military strategy aligns with the principles of the security doctrine and has weakened its ability to provide elements of deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory as necessary.

Strategic Outputs in Light of October 7

As stated, the security doctrine defines several strategic outputs that are essential for protecting Israel's national security. The first and primary output is **deterrence**. This refers to basic deterrence that aims to create periods of quiet that are as sustainable as possible, in order to focus national activity on developing the country, its economy and society (in Ben-Gurion's terms—building and solidifying Israel as a state).

Basic deterrence relies on a consistent, ongoing effort to dissuade Israel's enemies from taking significant steps to harm it, even though Israel cannot necessarily prevent

every hostile act against it. The main purpose of deterrence is to minimize military actions against it to low threat levels and lengthen the intervals between attempts to carry them out. It is called basic deterrence because it aims to address the most significant threats to Israel and to convince its enemies that they cannot bring about Israel's destruction through military means, and therefore, it is pointless to try.

Israel's basic deterrence is ultimately tested in the minds of its enemies and their perception of Israel as a whole, not just by looking at the objective military components of its strength. The development of basic deterrence relies, among other things, on Israel's enemies' perception of the combination of its military and strategic capabilities, the resolve to use them, internal cohesion and resilience, and international support for Israel. From this perspective, **maintaining and strengthening Israel's basic deterrence are not tasks that the political leadership can assign exclusively to the military leadership, which is in charge of key components of Israel's military strength; the political leadership also bears heavy responsibility for the broader political and social context of Israel's basic deterrence.**

In the security strategy layer, in the year prior to the October 7 attack, the political leadership did not prevent the weakening of Israel's basic deterrence in at least two spheres that are critical in the eyes of Hamas and the Axis of Resistance: the state of internal unity, given the advancement of judicial reform, and the escalating disagreements with the United States. This was despite **warnings** from intelligence officials and others that Israel's basic and situational deterrence had been compromised. **The political leadership did not assess the impact of the non-military components of basic deterrence on the overall balance sheet from the enemy's perspective.**

Based on the partial open-source information we have, it seems that the damage to internal unity in Israel was perceived by Hamas as

weakening Israel's staying power, potentially undermining its ability to mobilize and utilize the IDF's striking power against Gaza. It is possible that, from Hamas' perspective, the worsening of Israel's disagreements with the United States might undermine the American commitment to defend Israel. These two factors, which the political leadership did not take care to prevent due to insufficient attention to their possible impact on Israel's basic deterrence, contributed—along with other processes—to Hamas' perception of the window of opportunity to attack Israel in October 2023. As alluded to above, Israel's "iron wall" is not only physical; it also has a psychological component.

In the test of cumulative deterrence, the previous operations in Gaza did not lead to longer intervals of calm between Hamas and the Islamic Jihad's provocations or to a reduction of the firepower that they used against Israel. The intensity and range of the attacks increased with each operation, but Israel adhered to the approach that its deterrence of Hamas was effective. In May 2023, at the end of Operation Shield and Arrow, Prime Minister Netanyahu [declared](#):

We have changed the deterrence equation. I have no doubt about this at all [...] I cannot say that we will never return to attacks or when exactly this will happen, but there is no doubt that we have strengthened Israeli deterrence [...] this has several precedents [...] for example, what we did to Hamas in Operation Guardian of the Walls—we dealt them a blow that they had never suffered in their history, and since then, they have not fired a single rocket into our territory [...] therefore they did not participate in the previous operation or in the current operation.

The political leadership's adherence to the view that Israeli deterrence against Hamas was

effective stemmed from several motivations on the level of its strategic-political outlook. The government's policy on the Palestinian issue was based on maintaining the differentiation between Gaza and the West Bank, including maintaining Hamas as the ruler in Gaza as a way to weaken the Palestinian Authority and its leader Mahmoud Abbas. This strategic approach filtered into the military strategy with respect to refraining from decisively defeating Hamas and looking for "alternatives to decisive victory." Within this framework, the political leadership's directives on Gaza included postponing confrontations, relying on the physical barrier, conducting periodic strikes, and maintaining Hamas as an effective, restraining, and restrained governmental authority. Despite the limited impact of the deterrence against Hamas, the political leadership relied on it excessively as a central pillar of its strategy in dealing with Gaza.

Senior military officials were also infected with optimism regarding the effectiveness of deterrence against Gaza and did not sound the alarm on the issue, even though in the recurrent outbreaks of violence, Hamas increased the intensity of the violence from round to round. In this context, Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, in which Hamas' tunnel system was attacked from the air, was seen in Israel as a very important contribution to deterrence, even though the damage was actually limited. The head of the Operations Directorate at the time, Major General Aharon Haliva, claimed that the operation would lead to five years of quiet. Even after another operation—Operation Breaking Dawn in August 2022 against the Islamic Jihad, Haliva [claimed](#) that despite the need for another operation, he stood behind his statement. As [Amir Lupovici](#) writes, it seems that the military establishment was convinced of Israel's image as an actor that inspires deterrence and interpreted reality based on this image.

In contrast, it seems that from Hamas' perspective, Operation Guardian of the Walls showed Israel's weakness, not its strength. The

fact that Israel avoided a ground operation, along with the limited results of the air strike on the tunnel system, led Hamas to the realization that it was actually Israel that was deterred from fighting on the ground inside Gaza and that given the lack of success in damaging the tunnels from the air, it could survive intense Israeli retaliatory airstrikes (Hecht, 2024, p. 22). From here, it was a short leap to the belief that Hamas would be able to withstand an Israeli response to the planned October 7 attack, which would, in their estimation, be mainly from the air.

It is evident that in the period preceding the October 7 attack, no assessment was conducted by Israel regarding the balance of basic and situational deterrence vis-à-vis Gaza. This, despite warnings from working-level officials about the state of deterrence and partial warnings about what was developing in Gaza. It seems that on the level of security strategy, the political leadership was focused on advancing judicial reform without considering how it undermined Israel's image of deterrence in the eyes of its enemies. In addition, it seems that even if there was increased cohesion of the Axis of Resistance in the "ring of fire" being built around Israel, normalization with Saudi Arabia was just around the corner, which was to fundamentally change the regional strategic balance sheet in Israel's favor. On the level of military strategy, the IDF leadership underestimated Hamas' determination to pursue its vision of destroying Israel and the organization's military capabilities to carry out the "Jericho Wall" plan to invade Israel, and refrained from raising a red flag to the political leadership. It seems that both the political echelon and the military leadership relied on their evaluations of the physical results of previous rounds of violence with Gaza and did not examine in depth the more influential broader strategic shifts in Israel's basic deterrence.

The belief that Hamas was deterred led to **a failure to provide advance warning**

of the October 7 attack. There were at least four main reasons for this failure. The first was underestimating the influence of the religious faith component of Hamas' approach in general and that of Sinwar in particular. For the organization, the war against Israel is a permanent state and a continuous obligation, and the final victory is guaranteed by Allah even if it is not achieved quickly. Consequently, there was a great willingness to suffer significant losses for the future fulfillment of the vision.³

The second reason was the underestimation of the enemy's capabilities. Even if Israel did not believe in Hamas' ability to carry out a plan such as the "Jericho Wall," the intelligence should have evaluated what the other side believed about its own capabilities. It is now clear that Sinwar believed that the right moment had come to pursue the destruction of Israel, given, in his eyes, sufficient military force buildup; the potential to create a multi-arena campaign by intensively enlisting Hezbollah, members of the Axis of Resistance, and Arabs from the West Bank and from inside Israel for war; and the ability to bypass the barrier and bring the fighting into Israel's territory.

The third reason was a failure originating from a change that occurred over time in the approach to intelligence gathering. An overreliance developed on intelligence based on communications (COMINT) and infiltrating the enemy's computers at the expense of human intelligence (HUMINT) and monitoring public sentiments and discussions. As a result, an intelligence-gathering imbalance emerged that enabled the enemy to hide most of its preparations. The warnings that were received were not tangible enough to break the misconception that Hamas was deterred (Hecht, 2024, pp. 25-29; Hazoot, 2024, pp. 327-342).

The fourth reason is that Israeli intelligence did not properly weigh two strategic factors that influenced Sinwar's sense of urgency to carry out the attack: the serious internal dispute that, in his view, weakened Israeli society; and the discussion of normalization between Israel

and Saudi Arabia, with the associated negative implications for the balance of power in the region and the Palestinian issue (Hecht, 2024, pp. 22-23).

It seems that the emphasis placed in recent years on gathering intelligence for targeting and assessing physical results (battle damage assessment—BDA) weakened the ability to gather and evaluate basic and strategic intelligence, resulting in an unbalanced intelligence-gathering approach. In this context, the intelligence organizations were successful in identifying and locating Hamas military targets in Gaza but failed to raise a flag that might have prompted Israeli actions that would have prevented the October 7 attack or at least enabled a successful military response to it.

In any case, as we learned from the Yom Kippur War, Israel must not allow deterrence to be the final line of defense against the possibility of war. Therefore, the security doctrine requires a strategic output of defensive capability based on the standing army, followed by **decisive victory** on the battlefield. According to the classic victory concept of the security doctrine, this requires that the regular forces be prepared and ready on the borders and in the West Bank, along with sufficient and trained reserve forces. In the last few decades, Israel moved away from this victory concept and downplayed the importance of offensive ground maneuvers as a core component of achieving decisive victory. In this spirit, the report of the Meridor Committee (2006), which examined Israel's security concept, recommended relying on the use of precision standoff fire and limited ground operations in order to reduce the attrition of Israeli forces and take international and regional political sensitivities into account. This change, the report argued, is made possible by technological advancements on the battlefield. It seems the assumption that the era of large wars had ended, and that this development enabled the reduction of the IDF's ground forces and ammunition stockpile, penetrated military strategy.

As a **complementary measure**, the Meridor report recommended developing and advancing an air-defense component to enable partial offensive measures to be carried out without the Israeli homefront experiencing retaliatory barrages. As a supplement to this, the report recommended developing **alternatives to decisive victory** in order to allow for exit mechanisms that do not rely on decisive victory but rather create a basis for temporary arrangements that end the military friction and enable a reasonable strategic reality. It seems that although the Meridor Committee report was not officially adopted by the Security Cabinet, in practice, the State of Israel implemented a model of alternatives to decisive victory in the rounds of fighting against Gaza since 2008. It did so without a strategic assessment of this model's impact on the other side's perspective regarding Israel's cumulative deterrence strength and its willingness to fight on the ground.

While the terrorist armies surrounding Israel—especially Hezbollah and Hamas—invested in force buildup and devising offensive operational plans, the IDF reduced the size, capability, and readiness of the ground forces of the standing army and the reserves. This reduction in the size of the land army and its capability for high-intensity war was not discussed in depth with the political leadership and apparently stemmed from the preferences of the IDF itself.

Moreover, on the level of the military strategy, while the terrorist armies surrounding Israel—especially Hezbollah and Hamas—invested in force buildup and devising offensive operational plans, the IDF reduced the size, capability, and readiness of the ground forces of the standing army and the reserves. This reduction in the size of the land army and its capability for high-intensity war was not discussed in depth with the political leadership and apparently stemmed from the preferences of the IDF itself. Given the limits of Israeli military force deployed

along the various borders and in the West Bank, there were not enough regular forces along the border with Gaza to cope with the October 7 attack. It seems that there was no awareness of the question of what would happen if there was no pre-warning of an attack, and if the barrier was breached by large-scale enemy forces.

Furthermore, the failure to defend the border with Gaza resulted from the building of a defense system directed against terrorist threats rather than against a large-scale military threat, even after Chief of Staff Kohavi started to relate to Hezbollah and Hamas as “terrorist armies.” Although defense is the strongest form of combat, without awareness that the deterrence and early warning could fail, the Southern Command’s defense concept was defective—based on deficient allocation of forces, non-investment in fortifying a defensive line that would protect the communities of the Western Negev, and a lack of connection between the forces and the air force and navy—all of which contributed to the disaster (Hazoot, 2024, pp. 332-335; Hecht, 2024, pp. 31-32).

Recommendations

The article’s premise is that the most important single variable for improving Israel’s national security is the quality of the strategic-military decision-making processes. Consequently, the article focused on examining the implications of the misalignment and incoherence between the various layers of the national security concept and, therefore, recommends making a deliberate and consistent effort to rectify the deficiencies that allowed the emergence of the conditions that culminated in the disaster of October 7. The emphasis is on improving decision-making processes in the security strategy layer and creating professional and continuous dialogue, including direction and control, of the military strategy layer.

For the time being, Israel should continue to base its national security concept on fulfilling the four existing strategic outputs: deterrence, early warning, decisive victory, and defense.

This does not mean that it is not necessary to examine the effectiveness of each of these outputs given the emerging strategic-security reality or to examine other outputs, but this should be done according to the investigations of the war and the conclusions of the various committees that must be established to investigate the reasons for the war and how it was conducted. Iran’s possible transformation into a nuclear state will also require a thorough examination of the robustness of the overall national security concept.

In the security strategy layer, it is necessary to develop a format for formulating and approving a grand strategy and periodic strategic assessments. Eisenkot and Edelstein’s bill, which aims to establish and institutionalize the formulation and approval of a grand strategy and the creation of a link between it and the content of the periodic strategic assessments, is highly significant in this respect. Both kinds of documents should be presented to the Security Cabinet, discussed seriously and approved by it.

In actuality, annual strategic assessments are not always presented to the cabinet, as required by the NSC Law, and they do not determine whether Israel is realizing the strategic outputs dictated by the security doctrine. **The annual strategic assessments must include a dedicated clear assessment of Israel’s ability to provide the strategic outputs (deterrence, early warning, decisive victory, and defense) defined in the security doctrine in various scenarios.**

As a lesson from the October 7 attack, I propose that the NSC’s annual strategic assessment institutionalize an examination of whether Israel is fulfilling the principles of the security doctrine, including:

- Evaluating the balance of Israel’s basic deterrence not in its own eyes but also by examining the question of how Israel’s enemies interpret the balance of deterrence based on dedicated assessments from the Military Intelligence Directorate, the Shin Bet, and the Mossad.

- Examining the intelligence-gathering concept. Such an examination on the eve of October 7 could perhaps have indicated that the reduction of human intelligence and the closing of the open-source intelligence Hatzav Unit, created an unbalanced intelligence-gathering concept that overly relied on one kind of intelligence—COMINT and infiltrating computer databases.
- Assessing Israel's defensive capability in case of failure of early warnings in various scenarios. Before October 7, there was no awareness of what would happen if there was no early warning, so the political leadership did not examine in depth the question of the IDF's defensive capability in the various arenas in case of surprise attacks. The NSC's annual strategic assessment should provide an examination of this issue with recommendations for ongoing discussions that are needed on the issue in the Security Cabinet.
- Further to this, the annual strategic assessment should examine the IDF's estimated ability to deliver decisive victory in various scenarios while examining the relation between achievements, costs, and time.
- The situation assessment should also examine Israel's ability to defend itself in various scenarios and recommend necessary improvements.

The current format of the annual strategic assessment should be changed and expanded, with an emphasis on adding these security and military components, along with continuing to examine the strategic balance sheet and alternatives for Israeli policy. This change would be a vital input into the overall security decision-making process and enable channeling security activity in the required directions while truly synchronizing with the IDF and the other security agencies. Such a change would require increased inter-organizational cooperation between the NSC and the security organizations, with an emphasis on the IDF.

In addition, the functioning of the Security Cabinet needs to be improved, as does its direct involvement in managing the security strategy layer and the monitoring of the military strategy layer. The time has come to enshrine in law the composition and powers of the Security Cabinet, including its obligation to examine and approve the security strategy and periodic strategic assessments and to hold regular discussions and monitoring on the issues of the IDF's force buildup, operational plans, the intelligence gathering concept, etc.

The NSC has a critical role in enhancing decision-making processes in accordance with the security concept, both by virtue of its role as the coordinator of the Security Cabinet's discussions and as the body that is supposed to monitor the implementation of its decisions, formulate a grand strategy and periodic strategic assessments to periodically overview the national security concept, and deepen government ministers' knowledge of national-security issues. Within this framework, the NSC can and should play a central role in strengthening the integration between the security strategy layer and the military strategy layer.

The military leadership must demand that the political leadership provide it with relevant directives and set strategic objectives, rather than continuing the practice, in their absence, of independently determining force buildup plans and operational planning. It must insist on this dialogue taking place. Moreover, the military leadership needs to cooperate with the NSC for the purpose of submitting the expanded and integrated strategic assessment to the political leadership. In addition, it must ensure, irrespective of the political leadership's conduct, effective integration with the required strategic outputs derived from the security doctrine layer and continuously evaluate its adherence to them.

★

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Notes

- 1 US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made an identical [claim](#) in an article in *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2023) that analyzed the sources of American power (my emphasis): "Nothing in world politics is inevitable. The underlying

elements of national power, such as demography, geography, and natural resources, matter, but history shows that these are not enough to determine which countries will shape the future. **It is the strategic decisions countries make that matter most—how they organize themselves internally, what they invest in, whom they choose to align with and who wants to align with them, which wars they fight, which they deter, and which they avoid.**"

- 2 In this context, it seems that there has been no change in the reality that the State Comptroller [indicated](#) in his report on Operation Protective Edge 2014: "The operational plans for the Gaza Strip were presented to the cabinet ministers before the cabinet determined the strategic objectives regarding the Gaza Strip. As a result, the military leadership was forced to outline the strategic objectives itself and plan accordingly."
- 3 This view is expressed in the connection that Sinwar made between the attack that he decided on and the 17th Surah of the Quran (the Surah about the night journey), which describes a battle in three stages between the Muslims and the Children of Israel—the Muslims attacking the Children of Israel (the "first promise"); afterward the Children of Israel fighting back; and finally the defeat of the Children of Israel by the Muslims and reaching the holy places (the "second promise"). At the very least, the religious faith component should have influenced the assessment of how much Hamas was deterred—not based on the level of physical damage to it in each previous round, but rather on a supplementary analysis of the non-tangible and cognitive elements of the balance of deterrence against a religious entity.



The Risk of Changing the Status Quo on the Temple Mount

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The Temple Mount is the holiest place for Jews, but it is also the third most important place for Muslims. This is the background to the status quo arrangement introduced there by then-Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan in June 1967. One of the fundamental principles of this arrangement, which was scrupulously observed until 2018 by all Israeli governments and enforced by the Israeli police, was a ban on Jewish prayer on the site. In 2018, Jews were given permission to pray quietly without prayer accessories on the path close to the eastern wall of the Temple Mount. Since then, extremist Jewish groups have been persistently trying to obtain official permission for Jewish prayer in all parts of the Temple Mount.

The Palestinians are aggressively and violently opposed to this (to the point of suicide terrorist attacks), because they regard it as a desecration of the holiness of the Temple Mount to Muslims and an attack on its national importance to them. Israel therefore invites great danger if it allows Jews to pray on the Temple Mount. Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir has recently led calls supporting the granting of such permission. Despite the judgement by the Chief Rabbinate Council and leading authorities on Jewish religious law, that Jews must not set foot on the Temple Mount and the security warnings against this that have been issued, Minister Ben-Gvir is exerting pressure on the Israeli government to officially permit Jews to pray throughout the Temple Mount. He has personally visited the Temple Mount, prayed on the site, and declared a change in the status quo there.

This article reviews the history of the status quo, reveals for the first time that Jews have been authorized to pray in a specific location on the Temple Mount since 2018, explains the reason why Jewish law forbids Jews to do this, and warns about the security and political risks for Israel should it officially allow Jews to pray on the Temple Mount.

Key words: Temple Mount, Palestinians, Israel, Jerusalem, Islam, Judaism, status quo, Ben-Gvir, prayer on the Temple Mount.

Introduction

The Temple Mount is the holiest place in the world for Jews, because they believe that the Divine presence occupies it constantly and eternally. **Three** Jewish Temples stood there: the Temple built by King Solomon, the Temple built by the exiles who returned from Babylonia, and King Herod's temple. The Holy of Holies in these temples (the *Even HaShtiya*—Foundation Stone—in the Dome of the Rock Mosque) is the holiest place in the world for Jews. Only the High Priest ever entered it, and even that was only on Yom Kippur. In Judaism, this site is also regarded as the place where the creation of the world began, the center of the world, and the site where the Binding of Isaac took place (Berkovits, 2006; Berkovits, in progress, Chapter 1, paragraph 1). For many Jews, the Temple Mount is also a national symbol of the historical Jewish kingdom. Today, a growing number of Jews believe that this place is the key to the future redemption of the Jewish people in a Jewish kingdom. They want to build the Fourth Temple and perform ritual animal sacrifices there. This is the background to past attempts by "messianic" Christians and Jews to burn down the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Denis Michael Rohan in 1969), attack the Dome of the Rock Mosque (Alan Harry Goodman in 1982), and blow up the latter (the Lifta underground and the Jewish underground in 1984).¹

The site's religious holiness and national importance for the Palestinians are the basis for their demand to establish the capital of a future state of their own in Jerusalem. For this reason, the Palestinians oppose Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount with exceptional fury that has even extended to suicide attacks, even though there are no grounds for such opposition in Muslim religious law.

This site, however, which the Muslims call Al-Haram Al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary), is also the third most holy place for the world's

1.25 billion Sunni Muslims (after the Black Stone Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet Muhammad's Tomb Mosque in Medina), and especially for Palestinians. In Islam, this holiness is based on the belief that during his night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem on the flying horse al-Buraq, the Prophet Muhammad landed near the Al-Aqsa Mosque and ascended from the Dome of the Rock into the heavens. There he met Allah and received from him the commandment to pray five times a day, which every Muslim is obligated to perform (Berkovits, 2006, pp. 201-202).

The Temple Mount has accordingly been a place of **exclusively** Muslim ritual for some 1,300 years since the Arabs first conquered Jerusalem in 638 CE, except for the Crusader period in Jerusalem (1099-1187). There are now six mosques on the site: the Dome of the Rock (opened in 691 CE to commemorate the Prophet Muhammad's ascent into the heavens, and which became a women's mosque in May 1952; the Al-Aqsa Mosque (opened in 705 CE); the Al-Aqsa Al-Kadima Mosque (opened in August 1999); the Al-Marwani Mosque (Solomon's Stables), opened in December 2000; the Bab Al-Rahma Mosque (opened in February 2019); and the Al-Buraq Mosque (opened in the seventeenth century). Many Muslims pray five times daily in these mosques. On Muslim holidays and during the Ramadan fast, the number of Muslim worshippers on the Temple Mount reaches hundreds of thousands.

This site is also a supremely important national symbol for the Palestinians (both Muslims and Christians). They regard it as their last bastion of control in Jerusalem, because according to the status quo arrangement (see below), the Waqf still exercises civilian control over Al-Haram Al-Sharif/the Temple Mount. **The site's religious holiness and national importance** for the Palestinians are the basis for their demand to establish the capital of a future state of their own in Jerusalem. For this reason, the Palestinians oppose Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount with exceptional fury that has even extended to suicide attacks,

even though there are no grounds for such opposition in Muslim religious law. The reason why the Palestinians are so violently opposed to such prayer is that they interpret it as an effort to demonstrate Israeli sovereignty over their holy site, a grave breach of their civilian control of Al-Haram Al-Sharif, and a desecration of its holiness.

This is the background to the status quo arrangement on the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif, established by Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan (on his own initiative without a cabinet decision) in his meeting with the leadership of the Supreme Muslim Council and the Muslim Waqf in the Al-Aqsa Mosque on June 17, 1967.

The Status Quo Arrangement on the Temple Mount

The status quo arrangement on the Temple Mount includes three principles, and another principle was established shortly following Dayan's meeting with the leadership of the Supreme Muslim Council and the Waqf (see d below), at the initiative of Minister Menachem Begin:

- a. Internal civilian management of the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif will remain in the hands of the Muslim Waqf.
- b. The maintenance of public order and security on the Temple Mount and its environs will be in the hands of the Israeli security forces.
- c. Only Muslims will be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount; non-Muslims, including Jews, will be allowed to visit but not pray.
- d. Non-Muslims will enter the Temple Mount free of charge through the Dung Gate, while Muslims will enter the Temple Mount free of charge through eight other gates.

The Israeli government discussed the issue only two months after Moshe Dayan's announcement of the new arrangement. Dayan wrote, "Although, understandably, no minister wished to take a formal position stating that Jews were forbidden to pray on the Temple Mount, it was decided to 'maintain the current policy,' which in fact banned them from doing

so. It was evident that if we did not prevent Jews from praying in what was now a mosque compound, matters would get out of hand and lead to a religious clash... We should certainly respect the Temple Mount as an historic site of our ancient past, but we should not disturb the Arabs who were using it for what it was now – a place of Moslem worship" (Dayan, 1976, pp. 387-390).

The police have accordingly been taking care to prevent Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, and Jews who tried to pray there have been arrested, tried under criminal law, and given restraining orders forbidding them access for a given time. The police have justified their actions in preventing prayer by Jews on the Temple Mount by citing their duty under the law to ensure the maintenance of both public order and security, given the concerns about a violent reaction by Muslims to such Jewish prayer.

The Israeli government therefore never explicitly ratified the ban on Jews praying on the Temple Mount, and no law forbids them to do so. Among other things, however, Resolution No. 761 of the Ministerial Committee for Preservation of the Holy Places, dated August 16, 1967, states, "When Jewish worshippers ascend to the Temple Mount, they will be directed by the security forces to the Western Wall."² In addition, [High Court of Justice judgement 68/222, National Groups vs. the Minister of Police](#) (p. 170) quotes the Minister of Police in response to a question in the Knesset, "...The person responsible for the police station on the Temple Mount has explicit orders not to allow Jews to pray on the Temple Mount plaza in order to avoid clashes and public disturbances.' The learned state attorney has notified us that this order was issued in the name of the entire cabinet."³

Every Israeli government without exception, whether of the left or the right, including all of the governments headed by Benjamin

Netanyahu (1996-1999; 2009-2024) adopted the policy of barring Jews from praying on the Temple Mount, and ordered the Israeli police to prevent such prayer as part of the status quo.⁴

The police have accordingly been taking care to prevent Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, and Jews who tried to pray there have been arrested, tried under criminal law, and given restraining orders forbidding them access for a given time. The police have justified their actions in preventing prayer by Jews on the Temple Mount by citing [their duty under the law](#) to ensure the maintenance of both public order and security, given the concerns about a violent reaction by Muslims to such Jewish prayer. The High Court of Justice has approved this policy because of the “near certainty” that the public peace will be disturbed by a violent response by Muslims to Jewish prayer on the site. All the petitions filed at the High Court of Justice demanding that Jews be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount have been dismissed.⁵

Over the course of time, however, the police have shifted their restriction on Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount to prayer with “external expressions,”⁶ i.e. Jews were allowed to stand without moving and pray silently, but were forbidden to pronounce prayers even in a whisper (a violation of Jewish religious law, which requires that prayers be said aloud), bow (as practiced during the 18 blessings recited during the central *amida* prayer), or stretch their hands out in front with fingers spread (as practiced by the *kohanim* (descendants of Aaron the priest—members of the hereditary priesthood) when reciting their blessing, even though these prohibitions run contrary to Jewish religious law.⁷ Non-Muslims were also forbidden to bring prayer accessories, such as prayer books, *tallitot* (prayer shawls), and *tefillin* (phylacteries) onto the Temple Mount. In 2003, the Israeli police accordingly placed a sign at the entrance to the Temple Mount stating, among other things, that “**Religious/ritualistic activity with visible external characteristics is forbidden**” on the Temple Mount. The sign also

said, “**Taking ritual articles or other objects used for religious/ritualistic activity**” was forbidden.⁸

Prayer by Jews on the Temple Mount

In 2018, at the initiative of then-Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan and Jerusalem District Police Commissioner Yoram Halevi, Jews were permitted to hold daily morning and afternoon prayers on the Temple Mount with external expressions: reading prayers from mobile telephones and praying aloud in a quiet voice.⁹ This involved great risk because it was obvious that the Jews who wanted this would not be satisfied with “quiet” prayer with such modest “external expressions” on the Temple Mount. It was practically certain that a dangerous process of “improvements” would quickly ensue. In the next stage, worshippers would ask for better conditions for their prayer, and for the right to use ritual articles customarily used in prayer, such as *talitot*, prayer books, and *tefillin*. Then worshippers would demand that they be allowed to pray in some kind of building (like the Muslims), especially in the winter—in other words, that they be allowed to build a synagogue there, like the Muslims praying in a mosque. The next stage would be a demand by the worshippers and their supporters to allow them to build a large decorative synagogue (as proposed by late Chief Rabbis Shlomo Goren and Mordechai Eliyahu and current Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir), on at least the same scale as the Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock Mosques, in the name of national honor and equality of religious ritual rights between Jews and Muslims. Both in principle and technically, the existence of a decorative synagogue would shorten the route to renovating the synagogue and turning it into a temple, to be located in Herod’s addition to the Second Temple in the southern Temple Mount near the Al-Aqsa Mosque, or near the elevated area around the Dome of the Rock (according to a ruling by some rabbis that Jews are allowed to enter the Temple Mount), or

(if a red heifer is found) next to or instead of the Dome of the Rock, since the two Jewish temples stood there, according to Jewish law and tradition and the books written by Josephus Flavius.

In all the judgements by the High Court of Justice concerning access to and prayer on the Temple Mount, the Supreme Court consistently emphasized [the great sensitivity of this holy place from a security standpoint](#):

The Temple Mount is a volatile place into which flow rivers of molten lava from the national conflict and the religious conflict, resulting in the danger of an explosion in the heart of this blazing furnace. It will be no exaggeration to say that this is one of the most difficult and sensitive places in the Middle East, if not the entire world... Any small incident in this place is liable to cause great conflagration.¹⁰

On January 11, 2013, then-Jerusalem District Police Commissioner Major General Mickey Levy also issued a severe warning against changing the status quo on the Temple Mount:

The situation on the Temple Mount should be maintained as it is. The Court has ruled [this is an error. It was the Israeli government that made the decision in August 1967, S.B.] that any (Jew) who wants to worship God should be directed by police forces to the Western Wall. Period. Any attempt to change the status quo on the Temple Mount will be perceived as an emotional-religious attempt, and we cannot even begin to imagine the destruction, the damage, the casualties, and loss of life in vain. Nobody can measure that... If we are not exceedingly cautious, World War III will start here.

(Dangerous Liaison: The Dynamics of the Rise of the Temple Movements and Their Implications. Keshev and Ir Amim, March 1, 2013, p. 14).

In a speech to Likud members on March 7, 2020 (five days after the elections to the 23rd Knesset, won by the Likud), Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also revealed to his audience that Otzma Yehudit Party Chairman Itamar Ben-Gvir had proposed before the elections that his party (Otzma Yehudit) would withdraw from the elections and support Likud on condition that Netanyahu commit himself in advance to allow Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount. Netanyahu said that he had rejected this proposal because [“it would set the Middle East on fire and enrage a billion Muslims. There is a limit. There are things I am unwilling to do in order to win an election.”](#)

All of the terrorists left alive after the terrorist attacks committed at the beginning of the third intifada in the last four months of 2015, [cited](#) the protest against the Israeli aggression on Al-Haram Al-Sharif (the Temple Mount) and the attempts [to change the status quo](#) there by issuing a permit to Jews to pray there, as one of the two motives for their actions. For example, the terrorist who murdered three members of the Solomon family in the village of Halamish on July 21, 2017, [wrote](#) on his Facebook page before the attack:

I am a young man... I had many dreams and aspirations. But what kind of life is it... when they are desecrating the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and we are sleeping? It is a disgrace that we are sitting idly by... Why aren't you declaring war for the sake of God? They have closed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and your weapons are silent.

With this background, Israel **officially** undertook as early as October 2015 to maintain the status quo on the Temple Mount and prevent Jewish

prayer there. In view of the terrorist attacks in Jerusalem during the High Holy Days in 2015, the incitement by the Palestinian Authority concerning “Israeli aggression against the Muslim worshippers on the Temple Mount and the breach of the status quo there by Israel,” and the vehement protests by Jordanian King Abdullah, the Israeli prime minister was forced to reach understandings with American Secretary of State John Kerry at their meeting in Berlin on October 22. An [announcement](#) by the Prime Minister’s Office on October 25, 2015, stated:

Recognizing the importance of the Temple Mount to peoples of all three monotheistic faiths—Jews, Muslims and Christians: Israel re-affirms its commitment to upholding unchanged the status quo of the Temple Mount, in word and in practice. As we have said many times, Israel has no intention of dividing the Temple Mount, and we completely reject any attempt to suggest otherwise. We respect the importance of the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, as reflected in the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, and the historical role of King Abdullah II. Israel will continue to enforce its longstanding policy: Muslims pray on the Temple Mount; non-Muslims visit the Temple Mount

It should be emphasized that **this was the first time that Israel announced publicly and officially that Jews would only visit the Temple Mount, not pray there, and that only Muslims would pray there.** It was also the first time that such a declaration became an official part of the diplomatic agreements between Israel, the US, and Jordan. In their meeting on January 24, 2023, [Prime Minister Netanyahu again promised the Jordanian king](#) that the status quo on the Temple Mount would be preserved.

From a police prohibition, the ban on Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount thus became **an international diplomatic commitment** that in effect disavowed the right of Jews to pray on the Temple Mount **even in cases in which there is no near certainty that Jews praying there on a given date will result in public disturbances by Muslims.** The Israeli government thereby also officially and publicly rejected all the calls by the temple organizations, Temple Mount activists, and rightwing ministers and Knesset members to change the status quo on the Temple Mount by allowing Jewish prayer there.

Tens of thousands of Muslim worshippers pray daily on Al-Haram Al-Sharif, and their number can reach hundreds of thousands on Muslim holidays. If the status quo on the Temple Mount is changed and the Israeli government allows Jews to also pray on the Temple Mount, and even more so if the chief rabbinate states that Jewish law commands or allows it, hundreds of thousands of Jews will ascend the Temple Mount in order to fulfill this commandment yet there are no physical arrangements for such a phenomenon. In such a situation, the security forces will be unable to maintain separation between the masses of worshippers from the two religions struggling for both national and religious control over this site. The “near certainty” of bloody riots and deadly terrorist attacks against Jews in Jerusalem, all over Israel, and in the West Bank could thereby become a concrete and terrible reality.

[The number of Jews ascending the Temple Mount](#) has greatly increased in the past six years, reaching 45,000 in 2023.¹¹ Many of them even prayed there (on the path next to the eastern wall) under police auspices and in breach of the government’s commitment not to allow this and ensure the continuation of the status quo. Many of those ascending the Temple Mount are unimpressed by the predictions of the terrible results expected from a change in the status quo “with near certainty” following the issuing of an official permit for Jewish prayer there.

These people seek not only public Jewish prayer with visible external manifestations and ritual articles, but also the imminent construction of the Fourth Temple there.

If the Israeli government decides to officially allow communal Jewish prayer (and even more so with ritual articles such as tallit, tefillin, and prayer books), and still more so if Jews are allowed to build a synagogue on the Temple Mount, Israel's national security is liable to be seriously affected, because the Muslim world is liable to interpret this as a declaration of war against it. It is a near certainty that the result will be another Palestinian intifada with suicide attacks and many victims, both Jews and Muslims, on the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem, throughout Israel, in the West Bank, and even worldwide in protest against the "desecration" of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as the Palestinians call the Temple Mount.

Such a dramatic change in the status quo on the Temple Mount would unite the entire Muslim world against Israel, upset Israel's important relations with Jordan and Egypt (the only two Arab countries that have signed peace treaties with Israel) and with United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco (the countries that have signed the Abraham Accords with Israel). It would end the negotiations for such an agreement with Saudi Arabia.

Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty on October 26, 1994. Good relations between the countries are of profound diplomatic, security, and economic importance. Under the peace treaty in general, and in particular Article 9 (which recognizes the special status of Jordan on the Temple Mount), and due to the special relations between the two countries, Jordan has an important role on the Temple Mount. Similarly, Jordan regards itself as the custodian of Al-Haram Al-Sharif, the third holiest place in Islam. It is therefore clear that the Jordanians will regard a change in the status quo on the Temple Mount resulting from permission for Jewish prayer there as a grave breach of the 1994 peace treaty and the public commitment

of October 22, 2015, aimed primarily at Jordan, that Jews will not pray on the Temple Mount; Prime Minister Netanyahu's promise to Jordan in his meeting with King Abdullah in January 2023; and previous agreements between Israel and Jordan concerning this matter. A severe crisis in relations between the two countries would ensue.

Furthermore, official permission for Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount will also result in a crisis in Israel's relations with its closest allies in the world, such as the US, Germany, the UK, and France, and even more so with all the European Union countries. In such a situation, Israel can expect threats, condemnation, and a series of harsh resolutions against it in the UN Security Council (including sanctions), the UN General Assembly, and the rest of the UN institutions.

The first sign that this gloomy forecast is likely to materialize came after the hasty visit to the Temple Mount by Minister of National Security and Otzma Yehudit Party chairman Itamar Ben-Gvir on January 3, 2023. Although he entered the Temple Mount at 7 AM, stayed there only 13 minutes, did not pray, and made no statement whatsoever, it was enough to cause an international wave of protests and condemnation. In view of Otzma Yehudit's platform and the statements during the election campaign by Ben-Gvir, its leader, about the need to change the status quo on the Temple Mount by officially allowing Jewish prayer there, this visit by an important minister in the Israeli government was interpreted as a provocation and a preliminary step to an official change in the status quo. Immediately following his visit, UAE, Israel's new Persian Gulf friend, asked the UN Security Council to convene an urgent meeting to discuss Ben-Gvir's visit to the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif. [This discussion took place on January 5, 2023 – two days after Ben-Gvir's visit.](#) Most of the country representatives in the discussion condemned the visit to the Temple Mount and regarded it as a provocation. They called on Israel to preserve the status quo on the Temple Mount in order to avoid violent

riots in the occupied territories, in Israel, and throughout the region. It should be noted that many country representatives took advantage of the discussion to emphasize their countries' support for a solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians through realization of the two states for two peoples' vision.¹²

The Prohibition in Jewish Law on Jews Entering the Temple Mount

In 20 BCE, King Herod, with the consent of the Jews, demolished the Second Temple constructed by the returning Jewish exiles from Babylon and built the Third Temple, inaugurated in 19 BCE, in its place (Flavius 1963, 2011). For the purpose of constructing the new Temple compound (which also included a large plaza and three royal covered halls), Herod filled in the ravines surrounding the Temple Mount on the northern, western, and southern sides with tens of thousands of tons of earth, thereby more than doubling the area of the original Temple Mount—from 62.5 dunam (15.6 acres) to 144 dunam (36 acres).¹³ This is also the area of the Temple Mount today. In order to maintain the stability of the new compound, a retaining wall was constructed around the Temple Mount. The western side of this retaining wall is what is now referred to as the Western Wall. From the perspective of Jewish law, doubling the area of the Temple Mount did not change the areas to which the various laws of holiness applied during the Second Temple period, and today these laws apply solely to the area of the Second Temple (which preceded Herod's Temple). In other words, the areas added to the Temple Mount by King Herod (mostly in the south—the area of Al-Aqsa and Solomon's Stables) are not holy, and [it is permitted to enter them](#).¹⁴ According to the prevailing opinion, the especially holy part of this compound ("the abode of the divine presence"), which included the Temple and its Courts, was on the elevated plaza on the Temple Mount, in the middle of which stands the Dome of the Rock Mosque. This area was surrounded

by a wall (or an open area) five meters wide called the *chail* (rampart). According to the accepted ruling in Jewish law, the rock inside this mosque is the Holy of Holies of the three temples that stood here in the past (Ofen, 2022; Ariel, 1997; Wolfson, 2019, p. 107; Koren, 1977, pp. 300–310).

Almost all of the greatest and most important experts in Jewish law in Israel, both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, from the time of Maimonides until the present day, have said that Jews are forbidden to enter the Temple Mount. The Chief Rabbinate Council has expressed this view (in numerous judgments).⁵⁴ Of the most important Jewish religious jurists in Israel and more than 300 other rabbis signed the Chief Rabbinate religious judgement in June 1967 forbidding Jews to enter the Temple Mount.

The main reasons for this prohibition are as follows:

- a. The technical difficulty of determining the precise boundaries of the original Temple Mount compound during the First and Second Temple periods, especially the boundaries of the Temple itself, its courts, and the *chail*. Establishing the exact location of these sites is of decisive importance, because according to Jewish law, all Jews, except for most of the *kohanim*,¹⁵ are in a state of ritual corpse impurity, since they have either been present in the home of a dead person or have touched a deceased's clothing or possessions. A person in such a state of ritual impurity is forbidden to pass through the *chail* and enter the holy sites beyond it without having been previously purified with spring water mixed with ashes from a red heifer.¹⁶
- b. From the period of the temples until the period of the *Amoraim* (Jewish lawgivers in the third to fifth centuries CE), it was possible to be purified from ritual corpse impurity by using ashes of a red heifer. After the Third Temple was destroyed, however, this heifer became extinct, and Jews, all of whom were in a state of ritual corpse impurity (except

for most of the kohanim), were therefore forbidden to pass beyond the *chail*. The punishment for breaching this prohibition was *karet* (divine punishment by untimely death). It was feared that Jews who had not been purified with ashes from a red heifer would make a mistake in locating the area which those in a state of corpse impurity were forbidden to enter (beyond the *chail*), enter this area, and even reach the temple grounds by mistake.

- c. Concern about bloodshed resulting from the murderous response of the Muslim world if Jews are allowed to pray on the Temple Mount.

For these reasons, for the sake of caution, and in order to eliminate any possibility that Jewish law would be breached, almost all the great scholars of Jewish law completely forbade entry to the **entire** Temple Mount compound (Berkovits, 2006, p. 111-119).¹⁷

Jewish Law's Permission for Jews to Enter Certain Areas on the Temple Mount

Even though Jewish law bars Jews from entering the Temple Mount, there are today dozens of rabbis who have issued judgements permitting Jews to enter certain areas on the Temple Mount, most prominently late Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren and Rabbis Dov Lior, Nachum Eliezer Rabinovich, and Yisrael Ariel (Ariel, 2001; Goren, 2004; Wolfson, 2019). The basis for this permission is that these rabbis place the holiest compound, which contained the Temple and its Courts, and which was enclosed by the *chail*, entirely within the elevated area on the Temple Mount surrounding the Dome of the Rock, the area of which is 140 meters x 160 meters—22,400 square meters. In contrast, the Mishnah (Tractate Middot 2:5-6) lists the dimensions of the holy compound as: width from north to south, including the width of the *chail* on both ends (10 meters), as 77.5 meters; length from east to west (including the width of the *chail*)—171 meters. This would make the

area of the holy compound 77.5 meters x 171 meters = 13,252.5 square meters.

Even though Jewish law bars Jews from entering the Temple Mount, there are today dozens of rabbis who have issued judgements permitting Jews to enter certain areas on the Temple Mount, most prominently late Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren and Rabbis Dov Lior, Nachum Eliezer Rabinovich, and Yisrael Ariel.

In other words, the rabbis giving permission for ascension to the Temple Mount rely on the holy compound being completely within the elevated area surrounding the Dome of the Rock. They assert that the area barred to entry by people in a state of ritual corpse impurity is smaller than the elevated area, and that people in such a state can therefore also ascend to this higher level in the existing space between it and the *chail* on the north and on the south. According to the Mishnah, the holy compound is a rectangle with a west-to-east length of 171 meters, but the eastern side of the holy compound extends 11 meters beyond the edge of the elevated area, and there is therefore a non-holy area in the northern and southern part of the elevated area. Nevertheless, in the absence of certainty about the exact boundaries of the holy compound, especially given the deviation in the holy area on the eastern side of the elevated area, and for the sake of caution (to prevent any possibility that Jewish law will be breached), even the rabbis who allow entry to the Temple Mount still forbid getting close to the elevated area. They allow Jewish visitors only to walk around and pray on it at a distance of at least 12 meters. [Accordingly, a route for perimetric visiting and prayer was established](#) (coordinated between the rabbis allowing ascension to the Temple Mount and the police) for Jews wishing to pray on the Temple Mount. They enter the Temple Mount through the Hillel Gate (Moors Gate) pass near the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Solomon's Stables,

go from there to the paved path adjoining the eastern wall of the Temple Mount, and pray in a specific location opposite the Dome of the Rock. They continue on the paved path until they have almost reached the Gate of Mercy Mosque, turn west and walk from the north to the elevated area, turn south, and exit the Temple Mount through the Chain Gate (Goren, 2004; Wolfson, 2019; Koren, 1977).¹⁸ According to the rabbis who say that ascending the Temple Mount is permitted, Jews today are entitled to enter the Temple Mount and stand close to the elevated area of the Temple Mount at a distance of 12 meters from it, including **those who are in a state of ritual corpse impurity and have not purified themselves** with ashes from a red heifer, on condition, however, that they have immersed themselves in a *mikve* (ritual bath) before entering the Temple Mount (Wolfson, 2019).

According to the rabbis who permit ascension to the Temple Mount, prayers should be said in the area between the elevated area and the line running from the Hillel Gate to the eastern wall (as noted, the area south of this line was added to the Temple Mount by Herod) on the paved path close to the eastern wall, and in a specific area north of the elevated area. Indeed, in his visit to the Temple Mount on August 13, 2024, Minister Ben-Gvir walked around the elevated area on the eastern path, prayed there, walked around the elevated area on the north side, and left via the Chain Gate, as do the groups who pray on the Temple Mount.¹⁹

It should be emphasized that all of the rabbis without exception (including those who say that entry to the Temple Mount is permissible, and even Rabbi Shlomo Goren and the dozens of rabbis who are following in his footsteps) prohibit the entry of Jews to the elevated area around the Dome of the Rock because of the commandment to revere the Lord's Sanctuary, since the three

temples were located there.²⁰ All of the rabbis therefore hold that Jewish law currently forbids Jews to enter this area in order to pray or build the Fourth Temple there.

In view of the judgement by the greatest authorities in Jewish law, the visit of MK (his title at the time) Itamar Ben-Gvir to the Temple Mount on May 29, 2022, was severely criticized by Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef (son of the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef). In Rabbi Yosef's weekly lesson on June 19, 2022, at the Yazdim Synagogue in the Bukharan Quarter in Jerusalem, a synagogue identified with the Shas Party, **he attacked Ben-Gvir** in a style that he seems to have inherited from his father:

All of them forbade entrance to the Temple Mount. There's one called Ben-Gvir. He enters the Temple Mount boldly—what a *chilul Hashem* (desecration of God's name) to go against all the greatest rabbis. Stop and think a moment, moron. Is this like your rabbi or all these other rabbis?... This MK comes along, stirs things up... You should keep away from him and all his actions."

Rabbi Yosef also criticized Ben-Gvir's visit to the Temple Mount on January 3, 2023, in his own name, that of the Chief Rabbinate, and that of Jerusalem Chief Rabbi and former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar. In this context, the criticism of Ben-Gvir's visit to the Temple Mount in an editorial appearing in *Yated Neeman*, the newspaper of the Degel Hatorah ultra-Orthodox political party, on January 4, 2023, the day following the visit, should also be mentioned:

Such irresponsible shows endanger the lives of Jews and play into the hands of the inciters in mosques, the murderous ideologists of Hamas and the Islamic movement, who use such

useless and inane acts to persuade the Palestinian rabble that the Yahud will remove Al-Aqsa from its place, and they need to perform beastly ‘acts of revenge’... Who allows such people, including some people who look like haredim, to endanger the lives of Jews unnecessarily and in contravention of *halacha* (Jewish religious law)?

Haderech (The Way), the journal of the Shas Party, also published an editorial on January 4, 2023, severely criticizing Ben-Gvir’s visit to the Temple Mount:

It is obligatory to protest deeds forbidden and in contravention of *halacha*, and certainly when they involve ascending to the Temple Mount, which has been forbidden by the religious authorities in all generations... Nothing good can come from a breach of God’s will. Doing what is forbidden will mean no governance, no sovereignty, and no security; it can result in damage and attacks, God forbid.

The security warnings and protests against the violation of Jewish religious law had no effect on Minister Ben-Gvir, who again ascended the Temple Mount on the Tisha b’Av (August 13, 2024) with another member of his party—Minister for the Development of the Periphery, the Negev, and the Galilee, Yitzhak Wasserlauf. Hundreds of Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount took advantage of the Minister of National Security’s provocative prayer there to hold prayers themselves, including bowing down with outstretched arms and legs (as was the practice in the Temple), in complete violation of police policy and the status quo arrangement forbidding Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount. Even though many policemen were present on this occasion, none of them

enforced the prayer ban on Minister Ben-Gvir and the other worshippers.

This [visit](#) was also widely condemned, not only by Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and the US, but also in Israel. The Prime Minister’s Office stated, “**There is no private policy of any minister... on the Temple Mount... This morning’s incident on the Temple Mount deviated from the status quo.**” Knesset Finance Committee Chairman MK Moshe Gafni (United Torah Judaism) also [condemned](#) Minister Ben-Gvir’s behavior, saying that it “**goes against the great men of Israel and the chief rabbis... We will have to check with our rabbis if we can be partners with him in the government.**”

The opinion of the chief rabbis and most of the leading authorities in Jewish religious law is that entering the Temple Mount is a sin, the punishment for which is *karet*. Given the current political map, however, the religious political parties should not be expected to show loyalty to their religious values by following through on MK Gafni’s threat to leave the government coalition and causing it to fall, because the downfall of the current government will force the religious parties to give up the unprecedented huge budgets granted by the current government to them and their institutions. For the same reason, it is a virtual certainty that these parties will also not insist on the dismissal of Minister Ben-Gvir from the government in punishment for his repeated visits to the Temple Mount, despite the gravity of this violation and the fact that the punishment for it under Jewish law is *karet*.

Even more shocking, however, is the fact that the Minister of National Security, who is one of the main people responsible for enforcing the law, including on the Temple Mount (by means of the Israel Police, for whose actions he is responsible), is praying on the Temple Mount in breach of the policy of the government of which he is a member, and in violation of the rules for visiting the Temple Mount established by the police in order to carry out this policy. The police have arrested or detained for questioning, issued

restraining orders for given periods, and even instituted criminal proceedings against Jews who prayed on the Temple Mount, alleging that these Jews had jeopardized public safety and disrupted public order in breach of the police's duty to maintain public safety and order under Sections 3-5 of the Police Ordinance (New Version) – 1971, and to forbid interference with a policeman in the performance of his duty under Section 275 of the Criminal Code (New Version) – 1977.

The High Court of Justice has repeatedly affirmed the legality and necessity of the police policy in preventing Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, given the extreme security sensitivity of this site.²¹ The provocative visits by Minister Ben-Gvir, which are always accompanied by prayer and nationalistic statements, therefore constitute illegal behavior that is jeopardizing public safety and security, and is liable to cause a terrible conflagration on the Temple Mount. No one disputes that violent rioting on the site is a virtual certainty under these circumstances. This is particularly true at the present time in the midst of a war against Hamas, which declared its responsibility for the Temple Mount on Jerusalem Day in May 2021 and brought about Operation Guardian of the Walls, during which Hamas fired 4,360 rockets and missiles at Israel. The Hamas invasion of Israel and the terrible slaughter committed by its forces at communities and IDF bases on the Gaza Strip border on the Simchat Torah holiday, October 7, 2023, were also referred to in Arabic as Topan Al-Aqsa (Al-Aqsa Flood).

Given this background, the recent ascent to the Temple Mount by Minister Ben-Gvir, his provocative nationalistic statements there, of all places (“Bring Hamas to its knees”), and his call for a unilateral change in the status quo on the Temple Mount by holding Jewish prayer there now, are liable to escalate the war in the Gaza Strip into a new intifada in Jerusalem and the West Bank, and also to have a negative impact on the negotiations for the release of the hostages held by Hamas. [The Hostages and Missing Persons Families Forum has accused](#)

[Ben-Gvir](#) of thwarting a deal for the return of the hostages and contributing to their continued abandonment by ascending the Temple Mount and making extreme statements.

According to the traditional policy of all Israeli governments on Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, it could at least have been expected that Minister Ben-Gvir's visits would have been prevented. As mentioned, [a decision by the Knesset Ethics Committee](#) on November 2, 2015, barred Knesset members from ascending to the Temple Mount because of the security tension there. [The Committee rescinded its ban](#) only on February 1, 2017. It is time to renew this ban and to also apply it to the government ministers.

The police have forbidden Temple Mount Faithful leader Gershon Salomon from ascending the Temple Mount **for 28 years** because of the “near certainty,” in their opinion, that the presence there of someone who has planned to lay the cornerstone for the Fourth Temple, was liable to cause a violent reaction by the Palestinian public. In my opinion, the provocative visits to the Temple Mount by Minister Ben-Gvir also pose a similar, clear, and immediate risk to public safety and security, and it is therefore time to forbid him from doing this. Indeed, shortly following the writing of this article, it was learned that Israel Security Agency Director Ronen Bar had sent a severe [warning letter](#) on the subject to the Prime Minister, a number of other ministers, and the Attorney General on August 14, 2024—the day following Minister Ben-Gvir's latest visit to the Temple Mount. Bar warned and protested that **“progress in the direction” of a change in the status quo on the Temple Mount by conducting Jewish prayer there “would lead to great bloodshed and change the face of Israel beyond recognition,” and even “generate a significant risk to the security of the entire region.”**

The turning of a blind eye by the police to the prayers and violation of the status quo on the Temple Mount is dangerous and clear disregard

of not only the police's duty to preserve public safety and public order, but also of its duty to refrain from unjustified selective enforcement of this duty. **If the police have been forbidding Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount for decades and conducting criminal proceedings against Jews who violated this ban, why are they not also enforcing the ban against Minister Ben-Gvir and failing to prosecute one man of the hundreds of Jews who have violated it?**

Summary

As noted, the Prime Minister has reiterated that the status quo on the Temple Mount still stands and has condemned the prayer by Minister Ben-Gvir as a "deviation" from this arrangement. This condemnation, however, is **insincere**, because Jews are already praying on the Temple Mount in breach of the status quo arrangement. It is also known that the Prime Minister's military secretariat **gave advance written approval** to the request by Ministers Ben-Gvir and Wasserlauf to ascend the Temple Mount on Tisha b'Av, the day that commemorates the destruction of the historical temples. Nor was this approval made conditional on a commitment by the two ministers not to pray there, even though Minister Ben-Gvir had already prayed on the Temple Mount on his previous visit.

While Netanyahu's rejected Ben-Gvir's 2020 offer of political support in return for changing the status quo, it now seems that his political dependency on support from Ben-Gvir and his party is so great that **he is willing to "set the Middle East on fire" and "enrage a billion Muslims"** by consenting to Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount near the eastern wall, and to the entry of Ben-Gvir to the Temple Mount and his prayer there, as long as Netanyahu remains prime minister.

The question therefore arises: Given the Prime Minister's great dependence on support from Minister Ben-Gvir and his party, what will the Prime Minister do if it turns out that Ben-Gvir has instructed the police to cease enforcing the ban on Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount,

in complete contravention of the status quo arrangement carefully observed by all Israeli governments and despite the consequent grave security risk to public safety and security? This is not a purely theoretical question, because at an "Israel's Return to the Temple Mount" conference at the Knesset on July 24, 2024, Ben-Gvir stated, **"I am the political echelon, and the political echelon permits prayer on the Temple Mount."** Indeed, since Minister Ben-Gvir's latest visit to the Temple Mount on Tisha b'Av, the police have been allowing the Jews walking on the path next to the Temple Mount's eastern wall to not only pray there, but also to bow down to God with outstretched arms and legs.²² In a tour of the Temple Mount that I guided on November 20, 2024, I saw this prayer and bowing down with my own eyes. Furthermore, during this tour, I saw policemen also guarding a group of women praying **on the Western side** of the Temple Mount, near the steps leading to the Dome of the Rock plaza.

In view of his great influence on the Prime Minister, I call on Minister Ben-Gvir to step down (literally and politically) from the Temple Mount and announce that he will no longer pray there in order to avoid a violent response by the Palestinians (and possibly also by Arab Israelis) caused by their fear that his visits and prayers constitute a preliminary sign of a change in the status quo there in terms of Jewish prayer.

*

This article is based primarily on a book by Dr. Berkovits that will be published in the near future: **The Western Wall or an Al-Buraq Wall!?: The Struggle over the Identity of the Temple Mount, the Western Wall, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque.**

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Notes

- 1 I thank Prof. Mordechai Kremnitzer for drawing my attention to this matter.
- 2 The decision can be obtained from the Cabinet Secretariat.
- 3 See Supreme Court judgements 24(2) 141, 170; High Court of Justice judgement 4185/90, Temple Mount Faithful vs. the Attorney General; Supreme Court judgements 47(5) 211, 247.
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the status quo on the Temple Mount and its elements, history, and the changes that have been made to it, see [Shragai, Nadav. \(2014\). The Status Quo on the Temple Mount. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#); [Reiter, Yizhak. \(2017\). The Eroding Status-Quo: Power Struggles on the Temple Mount. Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research](#); [Ramon, Amnon. \(2022\). The Temple Mount/](#)

[Al-Aqsa: Heading Towards Loss of Control? Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research](#); Berkovits, 2006; *The Right is Turning the Temple Mount into a Jewish Settlement, Peace Now, October 17, 2015 (Hebrew)*.

- 5 Paragraphs 8-11 in High Court of Justice judgment 6031/22, Center for the Land of Israel and others vs. the Prime Minister and others, October 18, 2022; High Court of Justice judgment 5321/20, the Temple Mount Heritage Foundation, and the references mentioned in it; Paragraphs 3-4 in High Court of Justice judgment 6766/20, Center for the Land of Israel vs. Jerusalem District Police Commissioner Major General Doron Yadid; Paragraphs 3,12 in High Court of Justice judgment 6013/18, Moked: Israeli Center for Advancing Democracy and Protecting Human Rights vs. Israel Police; High Court of Justice judgment 8871/17, Foah vs. Jerusalem District Police Commissioner Major General Yoram Halevi. All of these judgments have been published on the Supreme Court website.
- 6 According to letters of the Israel Police Jerusalem District Commissioner dated March 19, 1997 and July 14, 1997 to Yisrael Medad, a member of the Temple Mount Faithful movement, who gave me copies of the letters. See also statements by a state representative on various requests in Jerusalem Magistrates Court judgment 433/95 (Shalom Jerusalem) concerning the criminal cases of Yehuda Etzion.
- 7 According to Jewish religious law, a worshipper must move his lips, whisper his prayer, and sometimes also pray aloud (such as in the repetition of the 18 blessings recited by the prayer leader), stand, and bow (as in the 18 blessings). Jewish religious law states, "He should neither raise his voice in prayer nor pray silently; he should pronounce the words with his lips so that he can hear what he is saying." For example, see Maimonides, Book of the Love of God, Laws of Prayer, Chapter 5, Laws 1, 3-4, 9, 10, 12; Laws for Reciting the Shema Prayer, Chapter 1, Law 4, Chapter 2, Laws 3, 8. I thank Yehuda Etzion for collecting these sources for me.
- 8 A petition to the High Court of Justice against this sign and these prohibitions was dismissed. See High Court of Justice judgment 6013/18, Moked: Israeli Center for Advancing Democracy and Protecting Human Rights vs. Israel Police.
- 9 I ascended the Temple Mount with one of the groups praying there on July 26, 2023 and witnessed prayer there under police auspices.
- 10 See also Paragraph 7 in High Court of Justice judgement 8026/16, Morris vs. Home Front Commander; Paragraph 11 in High Court of Justice judgement 8988/06, Meshi-Zahav vs. Jerusalem District Police Commissioner – published on the Supreme Court website.
- 11 According to information that I obtained from the "Yeraeh – Volunteers Encouraging Ascent to the Temple Mount" organization on March 26, 2024.
- 12 I thank the legal advisor of the Israeli UN delegation, Adv. Noam Cappon, for sending me the protocol of this discussion.

- 13 According to the Mishnah (the first written collection of the Jewish oral law) (Tractate Middot 2:1), the area of the Temple Mount in the Second Temple period was “500 cubits by 500 cubits.” The prevailing opinion is that one cubit equals 0.5 meters. The area of the Temple Mount during the Second Temple period was therefore 250 meters by 250 meters = 62.5 dunam = 15.6 acres. This is the area to which the laws of holiness apply to this day. According to the Jewish legal judgements, these laws do not apply to the areas added to the Temple Mount by King Herod on the southern, eastern, and northern sides.
- 14 Mishnah, Tractate Shavuot 2:2; [Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch](#).
- 15 The Torah (Jewish Bible) expressly forbids the kohanim (Leviticus 21:1-4) from becoming impure through contact with the dead, other than their immediate family, and most of the kohanim are therefore free of such impurity. I thank Rabbi Elboim for drawing my attention to this prohibition.
- 16 Mishnah, Tractate Kelim (Vessels) 1:8; Gemara, Tractate Pesachim (Passover), Page 67a; Rambam (Maimonides), Laws for the Temple, Chapter 7 - Laws 15-23, Laws on the Coming of the Temple, Chapter 3 - Law 5 (Red Heifer laws).
- 17 For example, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Responsa, Yabia Omer Chapter 5, Yoreh De’ah, Section 26; Rabbi Yitzchok Yaakov Weiss, Responsa, Minchas Yitzchak, Chapter 5, Section 1.
- 18 I learned all of this about the elevated area and the holy compound from Rabbi Yosef Elboim, chairman of the Movement to Rebuild the Temple, in our conversations on August 22, 2024, for which I thank him from the bottom of my heart. See also [Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch](#).
- 19 According to information that I obtained from one of the policemen who was there during the minister’s visit.
- 20 According to various opinions of archeologists and rabbis, all of the previous temples were on the site that currently houses the Dome of the Rock Mosque, or very close to it (Berkovits, 2006, p. 100).
- 21 Paragraphs 12-13 in High Court of Justice judgement 8871/17, Foah vs. Jerusalem District Police Commissioner; Paragraph 4 in High Court of Justice judgement 10450/07, Temple Mount Faithful vs. Major General Franco; Paragraph 3 in High Court of Justice judgement 4776/06, Salomon vs. Jerusalem District Police Commissioner; Paragraph 2 in High Court of Justice judgement 9074/03, Yehuda Etzion vs. Major General Mickey Levy. All of these judgements have been published on the Supreme Court website.
- 22 According to information and video clips sent to me on September 22, 2024 by Arnon Segal, a journalist and one of the main activists on the Temple Mount.



Misinformation and Division: The Significance of Policy Changes in Social Media Companies

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In recent months, the Meta corporation announced policy changes, including turning the number of “shares” into the main criteria of worth for further exposure, eliminating the fact checking system on Facebook and Instagram (as already happened on X), and raising the filtering threshold of its content moderation algorithms. These changes, combined with the noticeable way leading social media players are drawing closer to the Trump administration, pose a challenge to Israel’s national security at both the domestic and international levels. Israel should take action in various ways, including international cooperation, regulatory activity, and educational and informational measures to deal with the dangers inherent in these developments.

Key words: social media, sharing, division, antisemitism, community notes, fact checking, misinformation, foreign influence

Introduction

Social media has considerable influence on the public discourse and is increasingly functioning as a source of information and a substitute for established media channels. [A report on media and social media usage in Israel](#), published by the Israel Democracy Institute in May 2024, shows that most respondents (63%) get updates from internet news sites on a daily basis, while the percentage who get their information from social media is not much less—59.5% of respondents. These figures are even higher among younger respondents. According to the report, Facebook is the most used social network for news, with Instagram in second place. However, the report only surveyed adult users, which explains the relatively low rate of study participants who gave TikTok as their

primary source of information. We can assume that among younger users, TikTok is most frequently the primary source of information. According to a survey carried out in the United States, for example, some 40% of the 18-29 age group stated that TikTok is their source for news.

Given the prominent role played by social media as a tool for obtaining information, it is important to remember that their providers are commercial entities with financial interests that do not always match those of their users or of the state, who would prefer a responsible, authentic virtual space. It was these interests that, in recent months, led to a number of significant policy changes in the companies that operate social media. In this article, we

describe the changes, discuss their impact on Israel's national security, and present policy recommendations to address them in order to limit their inherent dangers as far as possible.

Shares, Truths and Community Notes

Meta is a technology company that operates three of the most popular social media networks in Israel: Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The company recently made a number of changes that affect part or in some cases all of these networks.

One change was turning the number of “shares” into the main criterion of worth for further exposure. In May 2024, the [head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri, announced](#) that the company's algorithm would expose posts with numerous shares to a larger audience. The purpose of the move is to encourage community engagement—whether by expressing support for the post's content or objecting to it. As part of this move, next to the Share button, under each post, there is a count of Likes, Replies, and Shares, creating a wide resonance for posts, even misleading ones.

Another important change concerns the [elimination of fact-checking on Facebook and Instagram](#) and its replacement with the Community Notes system, where users can leave corrections and attach supporting evidence to a post, like the one already existing on X (formerly Twitter). The fact checking process was set up following two prominent incidents in 2016: [The Cambridge Analytica affair](#), in which it was revealed that a private company had used social media data for the purpose of emotional manipulation, making precise characterizations of voter profiles without their consent; and the accusations of spreading false information and of foreign intervention, that skewed the results of that year's United States presidential elections that were won by President Donald Trump. Against this background, a fact-checking [system](#) was set up, consisting of over one hundred organizations to check content in more than sixty languages.

The [process](#) of fact checking and labeling was orderly and comprehensive: First of all, potentially problematic information was identified by the tracking technologies used by the company, by means of user reports or fact-checkers, and where appropriate, the content's exposure could be reduced. After that, the content was examined by cross-referencing the data and examining the authenticity of pictures and video clips. It was then rated as misleading, modified, partly false, missing context, satire or true, based on clear definitions accessible to the public. False information was labeled as such on the network and users were offered credible information on the subject, while its exposure was restricted and adverts appearing alongside it were removed. Private profiles or pages containing systematically misleading information were penalized with removal from the network's recommendations feature—reducing their exposure and thus blocking their ability to make money from adverts—and preventing them from registering as news pages.

However, on January 7, 2025 Meta announced that it had decided to cancel the fact checking system and to allow the community of users to determine the framing of content, as happens on X. It should be noted that on X this move led to a massive increase in the number of harmful posts, and the effect on Meta is expected to be similar. At the same time, Meta also announced that it was [raising the filtering threshold of its algorithms](#), which is expected to mean that fewer posts will be automatically removed, whether they are problematic or not. In the framework of current policy, it is possible to report a post, and if the complaint is found to be justified, the post will be removed, although the post remains accessible until the process is completed, and it is likely to gain resonance and influence public opinion in this period. According to Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, the way in which fact checking was done until then damaged freedom of expression more than was expected, and therefore it was necessary to change the

system and the content filtering threshold. These changes are intended to rebalance the discourse and promote freedom of expression, which was the original purpose of social media.

The Internet and Politics

These changes in the fact checking system and the filtering threshold are occurring alongside political and social developments, above all the close relationships being formed between politicians and technology leaders. The most striking example of these processes is the relationship between US President Donald Trump and the CEOs of large technology companies. The closest relationship is between Trump and Elon Musk, the owner of X, who [donated](#) almost 290 million dollars to Trump's election campaign, expressed his support in tweets that called on his followers to vote for Trump, and even participated in election rallies as a spokesman or observer. Trump, for his part, appointed Musk to take charge of streamlining the work of the Federal Administration, in addition to his links to the US Administration through numerous business deals, including building and launching spaceships for NASA and [supplying satellite internet](#) in many parts of the world via Starlink.

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Other technology companies are trying to catch up with Musk. According to reports, Meta [donated a million dollars to President Trump's inaugural fund](#), appointed [senior personnel identified with the Republican party to key positions in the company, and transferred its trust and security teams from California to Texas](#)—all with the aim of bolstering its relationship with the elected President.

The social network that aroused the widest public discussion in the days before the second Trump administration entered the White House was TikTok. A day before the new-old President took office, a [bill](#) supported by both parties came into effect, stating that apps controlled by rivals of the United States (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) cannot obtain cloud storage services or be available for download in American app stores. In fact, this bill started its journey towards the end of Trump's first term of office and entered the Statute Book during the Biden presidency, but this did not prevent Trump, on his first day in office, from signing an [executive order](#) delaying enforcement of the Act by 75 days.

This series of events would not have been perceived as problematic if it had not aroused suspicions that Trump's motives in changing his mind about TikTok were not pure. In the months before the election, candidate Trump decided to open an account on the Chinese social network and quickly gained some 15 million followers, who he claimed helped him to reach potential voters. The CEO of TikTok also recently visited Trump at his estate in Florida before he took office, was present at the swearing in ceremony, and the company, which claims it does not permit paid-for political content, [funded](#) a party for conservative influencers who helped Trump win the election. In an announcement to users regarding the app's return to use after the executive order was signed, the company thanked Trump by name.

These developments raise real concerns over the independence of social media and their links with elements in the administration. The competition between the social networks, which could force them to relinquish independence and yield to political dictates, reinforces this fear. Moreover, the current atmosphere could encourage politicians to try and influence the networks to a far greater extent, in return for regulatory reliefs or provision of the assistance they require. Links between administration elements and heads of industry are not new, but

lately, it appears that these links have become more open and blatant, and that the changes introduced by the companies to please the politicians have become more extreme.

Implications for national security

The extent of the use of social media as a source of information, particularly in view of the changes specified above, embodies many benefits but also significant challenges and risks for several aspects of Israel's security. The first aspect, which is not noticeably affected by the changes mentioned above and is [extensively discussed in previous articles](#) published by [the INSS](#) and on [other platforms](#), concerns the harm to privacy when information about users is collected by the networks. For example, the United States has [claimed](#) that TikTok collects data on the political opinions of American users, as well as their sexual inclinations. Such a wealth of information about Israeli citizens in the hands of social media could endanger Israel's national security because Israel would have no influence or control over who would have access to the stored data.

Another risk arising from the extensive use of social networks as a source of information concerns the internal discourse within Israel and its effect on the polarization and divisions that already exist in Israeli society, and as a consequence, national resilience. One of the main drawbacks of the consumption of information from social media is that most of them operate as a kind of echo chamber, in which the consumer generally follows people with similar opinions to their own. The information that these people share, and the way that the information is framed, mostly reflect the consumer's existing perceptions and do not challenge or undermine them. When so many people's understanding of the world is mediated through these channels, the result is a reduced likelihood that they will be exposed to the views of the other side. In this context, social polarization and division grow stronger when there is no common ground for discussion.

Moreover, as soon as an opinion is perceived as the "consensus view," people who disagree will often feel uncomfortable expressing their own views in public, which only intensifies the exclusivity of the existing view and leads to further radicalization of the discourse.

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The prominence of Facebook as a source of information has further importance in the context of social polarization, given the recent changes made by Meta to the role of the Share button: When the measure of a post's success rests on the number of shares, contributors have an interest in writing shocking posts that will provoke reactions and lead to multiple shares, whether as a sign of support or criticism. Once again, the opinions expressed become more polarized. The other changes made by Meta—canceling fact checking and moving to reliance on Community Notes, and raising the threshold of automatic filtering—are problematic in this context. The changes increase the probability of the spread of harmful posts based on lies. Moreover, contrary to the activity of the fact-checking system, which may not have been perfect but did [limit](#) the exposure of false posts and their [effects](#) in many cases, experience with X shows that Community Notes [do not limit](#) the [exposure](#) of posts and sometimes even [increase their exposure or support for tweets](#) for which [comments are written](#), so that the total impact of the recent changes is expected to lead to greater polarization and division in society.

To these processes should be added the interference of foreign elements that are interested in increasing divisions in Israeli society. In recent years, and particularly during the [Iron Swords War](#), there has been an

observable rise in the [spread of false information and attempts to exert outside influence](#) using the internet and social media. The purpose of these attempts is to influence public opinion and the way in which people act and vote, to encourage instability, and to undermine public trust in state institutions. There is some social awareness of this issue. For example, in a [survey by the Institute for National Security Studies in January 2025](#), 69% of Jewish respondents said they were worried or very worried about foreign intervention in social media (for example, by Iran or Russia) with the purpose, inter alia, of undermining social unity in Israel.

Most people are unable to identify campaigns of foreign influence and cognitive warfare or distinguish between them and legitimate posts. Meta's policy changes make it significantly easier for foreign influence campaigns and internal campaigns to intensify polarization, because it is relatively simple for them to create a false representation of numerous shares, using bots that increase exposure to their posts, and also because the removal of fact-checking and the raised filtering threshold for content moderation allow the spread of false information much more easily. As a result, these campaigns are expected to achieve rapid exposure, and it will be more difficult to stop them. For that reason, it seems likely that we will see more polarization and division in society.

Greater social polarization and division have a perceptibly negative effect on the resilience of Israeli society. First and foremost, they damage social solidarity, which is one of the main components of social resilience, as it encourages people to unite and work cooperatively.

Greater social polarization and division have a perceptibly negative effect on the resilience of Israeli society. First and foremost, they damage social solidarity, which is one of the main components of social resilience, as it encourages people to unite and work cooperatively. Not

only that, solidarity affects other components of social resilience, particularly indices of optimism and hope, by influencing how a society perceives itself.

As well as increasing social rifts, Meta's changes will have another dangerous effect on the domestic discourse in Israel: the possible undermining of trust in state institutions. The fact that it is so easy to spread false information on social media creates a situation in which unfounded theories, whose purpose is to undermine public trust in public bodies in general, and the IDF in particular, achieve extensive exposure and influence. For example, according to a study by [the Agam Institute](#), in December 2023, only 12% of respondents declared that they believed there was a conspiracy involving security personnel to bring down Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but by January 2025, more than 20% believed it. Moreover, 32% of respondents in January 2025 said they believed that Israeli elements knew about or permitted the surprise Hamas attack on October 7, 25% believed that Israeli elements were involved in the attack, 22% thought that elements in the army did this in order to damage Netanyahu, and 17% believed the recently discussed conspiracy theories that Yair Golan spied, collected information and helped Hamas to plan the attack on Israel. Although it is impossible to isolate social media's influence in this context and show a clear causative link between these elements, the prominence of these conspiracy theories on social media and their absence from traditional media reinforce the assumption of a link. Not only that, [a study conducted in December 2023](#) found that frequent exposure to social media made the likelihood of believing conspiracies 1.3 times greater—another fact that supports the assumption.

The damage to trust in state institutions and the IDF also intensifies the damage to social resilience, but it has other serious effects on national security. The IDF is the people's army, and it relies upon soldiers who serve in the

reserves and the regular forces. These soldiers are drawn from precisely the age groups that are most influenced by information found on social media, and they are therefore at higher risk of exposure to information that could undermine their trust in the army. This could affect their willingness to report for duty and perform their tasks, particularly in a sensitive situation like the present. In addition, public trust in the army is essential to ensure its willingness to follow the army's instructions. When the public lacks faith in the army and does not believe that it is operating with pure security considerations, it may distrust its instructions, for example, regarding the means of protection required in cases of attacks from various directions, or the timing for a safe return to evacuated homes.

A third important risk concerns the effect on international discourse and, as a consequence, on the international legitimacy of the State of Israel and the war against antisemitism. In the context of Meta's new policy, which rejects the use of fact checkers, antisemitic and anti-Israel information disseminated on the networks will not undergo a process of thorough clarification, which was the case until now, but a battle of versions between supporters and opponents of the information. For example, a user can post a conspiracy theory that will not be checked and not removed; this already happens on X, which uses Community Notes instead of fact checkers, as shown by a [tweet](#) from network influencer Dan Bilzerian, who wrote that six million Jews were not murdered in the Holocaust, hinting that the Jews are exaggerating the number of victims. Instead of a fact check that would remove the post, X is satisfied with the reactions of community members, and as of the time of writing, the tweet had attracted more than a million views, 13,000 likes, and more than a thousand shares. Social media provides users a kind of echo chamber, so those who are exposed to this antisemitic theory will form their opinion of this new information based on who they follow. If the people they follow are antisemitic, they will receive information that

supports this view, and if not, they will receive information that contradicts the claim. More concretely, the burden of disproving, moves from the writer of the post or publisher of the information to the users, who will have to provide proof and persuade other users that this is a conspiracy theory. This policy change significantly strengthens the ever-growing number of spreaders of false information.

Not only that, by prioritizing the number of shares as the main measure of worthiness for exposure, and because Jewish and pro-Israeli users are numerically inferior for demographic reasons, the anti-Israeli and sometimes even antisemitic position will gain far more exposure than posts supporting Israel and objecting to antisemitism, or at the least, setting the record straight. Combining the effects of two decisions significantly threatens Israel's international legitimacy, and sometimes its political and military freedom to act.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The changes introduced by social media, together with their deepening ties with elements in the United States Administration, present challenges for Israel's policy-makers. There is no doubt that a systemic Israeli reaction is required at several levels, particularly because, notwithstanding [many recommendations](#), Israel currently places no liability on digital platforms for the content they distribute. In order to find the balance between the wish to protect freedom of expression and the liberal values that are the foundation of both social media and Israel on the one hand and to provide a defense against the potential risks, particularly in view of the recent changes, on the other, we propose taking action at a number of levels simultaneously. Israel should:

- Join forces with other countries and bodies: As a small country, Israel has limited levers of influence on social media; for them, Israel is a small market, and if it imposes restrictions on the activity of social media, it will possibly be more worthwhile for them to abandon it

rather than accede to its demands. Therefore, it is logical to join up with other countries in order to exert pressure on the companies to remove certain content and restore balance, particularly in view of the latest changes, that threaten not only Israel but other countries as well, due to the danger of increasing the spread of false information and the ease of conducting foreign influence campaigns. The European Union, for example, is already doing this, and Israel can provide it and other groups of countries with information about problematic posts or policies that will help them in their dialogue with the companies, even if Israel is not itself a member of these groups. Moreover, Israel is a member of several international organizations, so it could raise the subject in wider forums and build ties with other countries on this basis.

We propose the establishment of a “notice and action” mechanism, as proposed by the Advisory Committee to the Minister of Communications in 2022, which will enable Israeli users to report illegal and harmful content and require the networks to deal with such content by removal or by limiting its exposure in the case of a gray area, or in the case of a failure by the actor to accept the report. Non-compliance by the network would result in sanctions.

- **Regulatory moves:** In view of the understanding that the operators of the large social media platforms are not neutral players in the market of views and ideas, it is justified to impose some legal liability on them in order to ensure their platforms are safe for Israeli users. In this context, we propose the establishment of a “notice and action” mechanism, as proposed by the [Advisory Committee to the Minister of Communications in 2022](#), which will enable Israeli users to report illegal and harmful content and require the networks to deal with such content by removal or by limiting its exposure in the case

of a gray area, or in the case of a failure by the actor to accept the report. Non-compliance by the network would result in sanctions. Ordinary citizens and reliable reporters, who have been defined by the legislator or by the platform operators as such, and who meet the criteria—independence from the platform operators, able to locate problematic content, and have a high degree of continuity in their presence on the platform—can engage this mechanism and would be given priority in its implementation. The mechanism would be accessible from the platforms, and it would report to an independent committee representing the legislator, on the quality and handling time of complaints—information that will be fully transparent to the general public. If harmful content is brought to the attention of the platforms and they fail to deal with it in a reasonable and proportionate way, legal liability will be enforced. This recommendation is particularly important in view of the removal of the fact-checking function and the need for an alternative response to false information.

A framework that could inspire legislation in Israel is the Digital Services Act (DSA), which came into force in 2022 in the European Union and redefines the relationship between the platforms, the public and the government. As part of ensuring legal liability, the Court would issue an order to be discussed in the presence of a judge and a legal representative of the social media platform on how the platform dealt with specific content. If the handling is defective, the platform’s operators can be fined. The Court will have the power to decide whether the content should be removed immediately, or given limited exposure to maintain freedom of expression, or to reject the claim.

- **Educational activity and strengthening digital literacy:** Since the changes described above are expected to lead to an increase in false information on social media, digital literacy is even more important. The [programs](#)

currently offered by the Israeli Ministry of Education are essentially voluntary and not binding on schools. Digital literacy programs are widely used all over the world, tailored to users of various ages and backgrounds. Since even young children have access to social media, these programs should begin during the first years of primary school, even before the children start using social media, to prepare them for this move. Teachers and educators must also be trained to deal with cases of false information and with abusive posts, advising their pupils as necessary. For cases where there is potential for seriously false information, special training programs must be developed for citizens. Similarly, the Taiwanese Ministry of Digital Affairs prepared its citizens to identify false information and network manipulation before the country's presidential elections.

- Providing information: Israel must set itself targets for tackling disinformation, particularly because of the anti-Israel campaign it faces and the danger of this campaign gathering even greater momentum when the number of shares is the measure of worth for exposure. Like Israel, Taiwan has to deal with external influences on its social media, and it has therefore established the [2-2-2 principle](#), which states that the country must respond to every item of false information within two hours, with two pictures and 200 words. If this principle were to be implemented in Israel, it would quickly help to counter the spread of harmful disinformation. If the decision is taken to import this model to Israel, there

must be a prior decision as to who will be responsible for it since in Taiwan it would obviously be the Ministry of Digital Affairs, but in Israel, it is not clear whether it should be the Foreign Ministry, the National Information System or the Ministry for the Diaspora & The Fight Against Antisemitism, or indeed some other entity. Our recommendation is to place the responsibility on the Digital Department of the Foreign Ministry.

Taiwanese civil society is also active on this matter, and civil organizations there have set up a chatbot whose purpose is to let citizens know whether the information to which they are exposed on social media has been verified or not. This should be fairly easy to adopt, particularly since Israel already has civil society organizations engaged in this subject, such as Fake Reporter.

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Russian Policy in the Middle East in the Context of the Struggle Against the West: Insights for Israel

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In recent years, Moscow has accelerated its system of partnerships with destabilizing actors around the world based on the logic of conflict with the West, which has intensified against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Many of these actors—states and terrorist organizations—operate in the Middle East and are involved in the armed conflicts with Israel in a way that makes this Russian strategy an indirect threat to Israel. Israel's assertive actions in friction zones in the last year as part of its multi-arena war, which have impacted Russian interests and assets, and President Trump's push for quick agreements with Russia, could restrain Russia's provocative strategy. An analysis of the Kremlin's considerations and interests in the region helps understand the causal relationship between the developments and the change in Russia's conduct. Israel should understand how best to interpret Moscow's activity, which Israeli actions contribute to restraining Russia's relations with actors that are hostile to Israel, and how the negotiations between Moscow and Washington will affect Russia's policies in the region.

Keywords: Russia, Israel, the United States, hybrid warfare, the Middle East, the Houthis, Syria, Hamas, Iran, the war in Ukraine, the Soviet Union, Putin, Trump.

A Historical Lens on the Russian Approach to Actors in the Middle East

Throughout almost the entire the Cold War—from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s—the Soviet Union's policy on the Israeli-Arab conflict in the Middle East converged, as a rule, on a dualistic view of the inter-bloc competition. Thus, the “progressive” Arab countries (socialist and nationalist regimes that were established in the second third of the twentieth century) received Soviet diplomatic and political support as well as military aid. In contrast, Israel, which

from its outset abandoned its non-aligned socialist agenda, was seen by Moscow as an ally of the Western powers (Britain, France, and the United States) and thus was treated with suspicion and hostility even during the years when there were diplomatic relations between Israel and Russia, and certainly after they were severed following the Six Day War. In each round of Arab-Israeli wars, the Soviet Union stood clearly with the Arab countries, including providing military aid and deploying military advisors in Syrian and Egyptian territory, with Russian fighter pilots even participating in

battles against the Israeli Air Force ([Operation Rimon 20, 1970](#)).

With the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union (later Russia) and Israel in 1991, the principles of Moscow's policy toward the region changed. The dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the Russian desire to build a positive relationship with the Western world, as well as the large-scale immigration from Soviet republics to Israel that began at the end of the 1980s, served as a solid foundation for the development of diplomatic relations between Israel and Russia. The threat of Islamist terrorism that Moscow experienced in the northern Caucasus also contributed indirectly.

Russia began to pursue a policy of “talking to everyone” in the Middle East and gradually (and especially in the 2000s) increased its activity in the region—reinforcing its good relations with Israel and continued cooperation with Arab actors (including Syria and the Palestinian factions) and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This constructive approach (from an Israeli and Western perspective) was expressed in an effort to influence the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the UN), mediation attempts following the capture of Gilad Shalit, and the accelerated development of its relations with Israel in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century.

Russia simultaneously developed and deepened its relations with Hamas (which it sees as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, alongside the Palestinian Authority), expanded its military and intelligence presence in Syria in [full synergy with Assad's army and security agencies](#) (while maintaining security coordination with Israel) and gradually strengthened its military relationship with Iran through cooperation on the war in Syria and also in other areas. In addition, Russia invested considerably in developing economic and business relations, especially surrounding

the coordination of energy prices (the OPEC+ mechanism), the development of resource-intensive infrastructure projects (nuclear power plants in Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and more), and numerous arms sales deals.

The War in Ukraine

Although signs of this shift can be traced back to 2014, the prominent shift in logic of the Kremlin's foreign strategy occurred after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the West's severe diplomatic, economic, and military response. Until then, the need to cope with Western pressure was not a primary consideration in determining Russian policy toward one actor or another, but the heavy international pressure following the invasion caused Russia to change its priorities in managing its international relations and focus on a diplomatic agenda that was adversarial toward the West with an emphasis on the Global South (non-Western countries). This was expressed in several efforts: First, mobilizing support from countries with preexisting anti-Western positions (such as Iran); second, ensuring that the neutral countries—those that did not join the sanctions that the West imposed—would not change their position (Israel, the Gulf countries, and many others); and third, maintaining bilateral relations with countries belonging to Western “clubs” but with a more careful approach toward Russia (such as Turkey, a NATO member).

Russia chose to adopt a pro-Hamas position because this cohered with its policy of mobilizing support in countries in the Global South, as most of them see Israel as the West's representative in the region.

These trends in the Middle East became even more pronounced after October 7, 2023. Russia chose to adopt a pro-Hamas position because this cohered with its policy of mobilizing support in countries in the Global South, as most of them see Israel as the West's representative

in the region. Thus, Israel itself is not a valuable target of Russian attacks, but Russia's support for Hamas serves its broader diplomatic agenda, which is dictated by the constraints of the war in Ukraine and the conflict with the West.

Aside from maximizing the connection with actors that do not promote a Western agenda, the Kremlin is looking for opportunities to harm Western countries and intentionally weaken them, as long as its actions do not cross the threshold of direct military escalation. This conduct—which can be called hybrid warfare—is expressed in a variety of efforts: From the diplomatic-public perception campaign, which, in the context of the war in the Middle East [presented the United States and the West as responsible for humanitarian catastrophes](#) that Israel supposedly deliberately causes in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon; to large-scale disinformation campaigns ([including in Israel](#)) to inflame internal tensions and undermine social and political cohesion; to physical sabotage operations in Western countries, [assaults on diplomats and intelligence personnel](#), and encouraging violent activity against Western interests.

Hybrid warfare methods are not new, but their prominence in the Kremlin's policy toolkit has increased in the past two years. Both strategies—expanding the leveraging of relations with actors that are not pro-Western and the hybrid struggle against Western interests and assets—are expressed in Russian foreign policy in general and in the Middle East in particular. It is important to remember that the Middle East is just one region in the overall “playground,” in which Russia has assets, leverage, and interests that create opportunities for action. The current dialogue between Moscow and Washington (details below) reflects precisely this wider global playing field where the powers engage in a variety of arenas in which interests can be advanced in certain regions at the expense of concessions on other issues.

In June 2024, [Putin began to discuss the possibility of supplying advanced weapons](#)

to “regions from which attacks may be possible against sensitive targets in countries providing weapons to Ukraine.” This provocative statement was preceded by a decision by Kyiv's main arms suppliers (chiefly the United States during the Biden administration) to partially remove restrictions on the use of their weapons within Russian territory, which allowed the Ukrainians to improve their positions in the war. Since then, Britain, France, and the United States have expanded the authorization for attacks inside Russian territory several times, including the use of precision missiles with ranges of hundreds of kilometers. Following this shift in policy, Russia has started to look for ways to hurt the West, including via military proxies—as a kind of “symmetric” response—and, to this end, has strengthened its relations with some of the most prominent anti-Western actors.

Examples of the Development of Russia's Relations with Anti-Western Actors Throughout the Middle East

The Houthis—The most prominent example of Russia's proactive policy of establishing practical leverage against the West is the dynamic of their relations with the Ansar Allah movement of the Houthis, who have declared that the rationale behind their attacks on international shipping routes and Israeli territory is to cause military and economic harm to Israel. The talks with the Houthis, who are disrupting the movement of merchant ships in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, began at the end of 2023. But in June 2024 (following the announcement of Russia's strategy of providing weapons to the West's enemies), [reports](#) emerged that [Russia was considering transferring advanced weapons, specifically cruise missiles](#), to the movement. Ostensibly Saudi Arabia had been informed (apparently by the Russians themselves) and blocked the transfer, suggesting that Moscow promoted the move with a certain degree of conspicuousness (though not publicly). Furthermore, the Russian aid effort included [sending several military intelligence officers to](#)

Houthi bases for military consultations of one kind or another, transferring satellite photos to improve the guidance of the launches that the Houthis carry out, and talks involving the veteran Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout to promote arms deals.

It is evident that this development is directly connected to the Western countries' decision to approve Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory, and it is an expression of increased pressure (via the Axis of Resistance) on Western forces and interests in the Middle East. The Russians (and the Chinese) have apparently also reached agreements with the Houthis on international political backing for the movement in return for refraining from attacking ships belonging to the two countries—although since then, several ships carrying Russian cargo have been affected by the attacks from Yemen. Moreover, the Houthis made at least two visits to Moscow—in January 2024 (when they discussed, among other things, the effort to end the war in the Gaza Strip) and in July 2024. The visits were presented publicly as diplomatic dialogue with the Russian Foreign Ministry, but military talks probably also took place.

Hamas—Following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, it appears that Russia exploited the war in Gaza (and Lebanon) in the diplomatic-public relations sphere to chastise and weaken the West—both with respect to the Ukrainian arena (reducing attention and drawing resources) and the Middle East (boosting anti-Western sentiment among the public and local political elites). Since Hamas' attack on Israel, Russia has hosted at least six official visits from leaders of Hamas' military wing in Moscow (October 26, January 19, the meeting of the Palestinian factions on March 1, June 24, October 23, and February 3, 2025), while providing the terrorist organization with political backing at the UN, strengthening Hamas, and declaring it a recognized political actor and even as a legitimate party in discussions on ending the war.

There are also reports of Hamas receiving Russian weapons, including an unverified claim by a Hamas official that it produces light weapons in Gaza under a Russian franchise. These reports have not been refuted or denied by Russia—in contrast with the situation less than a decade ago when Putin took pride in counterterrorism cooperation with Israel and saw it as a model for future activity. It should be noted that even if Russia was interested in providing material, military, and other assistance to Hamas, doing so is logistically difficult. However, Hamas' continued presence as an active player in the arena forces Israel and its allies in the West to commit resources to combatting it, and thus serves Russia.

Syria—The Assad regime, Moscow's longtime protégé, fell (December 8, 2024) following an attack by the rebel coalition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), notwithstanding the Russian forces deployed in the country to prop up the regime. Moscow has reached temporary understandings with the new regime in Damascus on not forcefully expelling its forces and is now conducting complex negotiations on permanently maintaining its military bases on the Syrian coast and on terms for cooperation. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the lack of progress in lifting Western sanctions (against HTS), Russia is offering itself as an economic, logistical, and perhaps also military partner (the Syrian army depends on Russian weapons) to Damascus while continuing to sharply criticize Israel for its actions in the Syrian arena.

Iran—A surge in military cooperation between Russia and Iran began in the summer of 2022 due to Tehran's willingness to supply Moscow with weapons for the war in Ukraine (suicide drones, ballistic missiles, and other munitions), which Russia urgently needed once it began to exhaust its own independent capabilities. On the Russian side, this cooperation is reflected in major deals to supply weapons to Iran, primarily focused on aircraft, including the advanced SU-35 aircraft (a deal that had started to take

shape even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine but was pushed forward starting in 2022, though it has not yet been completed). Additionally, there have been reports of the deployment of Russian electronic warfare systems in Iran due to the increased American presence in the region, against the backdrop of the tensions between Israel and Iran in the second half of 2024.

Regarding Israel, Russia has oscillated between publicly backing Iran—it justified the missile attack on Israel in April 2024, claiming that it was an act of self-defense according to the UN Charter—and calling for de-escalation and even offering to mediate between Iran and Israel after the exchange of strikes in October, due to growing concerns of a broader escalation between the sides.

In January 2025 Moscow and Tehran signed a strategic partnership agreement that emphasized their intentions to continue to develop mutual assistance programs, including in the political-military sphere. However, it should be noted that the cooperation between the two countries is limited, in part due to Russia's inability to resupply Iran with new air defense systems to replace those damaged by Israel (due to Russia's own internal needs), delays in the supply of weapons promised by Russia, and mutual accusations regarding the collapse of Assad's army and regime in Syria.

The Impact of Trump's Return to the White House

After Donald Trump, who declared his intention to work toward quickly ending the war in Ukraine, was reelected as US president, a rapid process of rapprochement between Russia and the United States began. This is reflected in high-level talks (up to president level) and official bilateral meetings in Riyadh, Istanbul, Moscow and Washington, attended by the foreign ministers, national security advisors and presidential special envoys—for the first time since the war in Ukraine began.

Among the topics for discussion and coordination in Riyadh (where the main focus

was the possibility of a deal to end the war in Ukraine under terms favorable to the Kremlin), issues in the Middle East were also raised—in particular, the war in Gaza and Russia's presence in Syria. Trump is interested in a complex deal with Russia, apparently even at the cost of undermining US allies in Europe and Ukraine, and he is pursuing a wide agenda with many topics for discussion with the Kremlin.

Thanks to Trump, Russia has managed to return to the forefront of the international stage while speaking “one on one” with the United States, without having to make any concessions (unlike during Biden's term, when the U.S. demanded Russia halt its aggression as a precondition for any normalization talks) and without the presence of the other Western representatives. Russia's goal is to be officially recognized as an actor on par with the United States, reminiscent of the division of the world at the Yalta Conference at the end of World War II. To this end, Putin is willing to offer a wide variety of avenues for cooperation (economic, diplomatic, and political-military).

Russian policy in the international arena in general and the Middle East in particular seemingly contradicts the spirit of developments currently taking shape between the two leaders. However, in practice, all of the means and tools that Russia has accumulated over the years that have the potential to harm the West and the United States, may serve as bargaining chips in negotiations between the two powers. This is because Putin has found a convenient partner in Trump, who is willing to compromise on the principles of collegiality and the demands on Russia that are shared by all of the Western countries, for the sake of political pragmatism.

It is too early to tell whether the emerging negotiations will truly succeed and lead to concrete agreements, but in any case, Russia's assets in the anti-Western countries in the region—such as its bases in Syria, aid to the Houthis, and cooperation with Iran—may be useful as either carrots (conceding some of them) or sticks (accelerating relations and

utilizing them to a greater extent against American interests).

Implications for Israel and Recommendations

As stated above, Russia's policy in the Middle East aims to expand its toolkit in the global struggle (which is mainly against the West) while attempting to exploit the various local actors in its favor and create an image of dominance and influence. As Russia sees things, Israel is a regional actor with several main characteristics:

- On one hand, Israel has a clear affiliation with the Western camp, which makes it a convenient target for hostile criticism from Moscow. Russia thus “wins points” with countries in the Global South, inside and outside of the Middle East, through both purely rhetorical actions and by providing aid to Israel's adversaries. This public criticism helps Russia strengthen relations with countries and organizations in conflict with the West and its allies, thus further solidifying its influence in the region. In this respect, Israel itself is not a primary target of Russia's adversarial activity (unlike Europe, for example) and the Kremlin's interests are sufficiently served by a regular routine of diplomatic libels and [a disinformation campaign](#) to undermine internal social and political stability in Israel.
- On the other hand, Israel has significant offensive capabilities (first and foremost military ones) that occasionally remind Russia of the risks associated with its overtly anti-Israel policy (as expressed, for example, from October 7, 2023 until the summer and fall of 2024). Thus, in the final months of 2024 and especially after the beginning of Operation Northern Arrows in Lebanon, Israel began exerting significant force in various arenas (primarily in Lebanon, Iran, and Syria), which, among other things, (indirectly) led to the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus. Following Israel's actions, Russia adjusted its approach, launching a series of initiatives ([unusual](#)

[visits to Israel by Kremlin representatives](#) and involvement in an offer to mediate vis-à-vis Iran [and Lebanon](#)) aimed at mitigating potential damage from Israel's continued operations. These initiatives did not necessarily bear fruit (particularly in the Syrian arena) but reflected Moscow's concern and its understanding that it must take the Israeli factor more into account. This change highlights the main insight that Israel must internalize as a default: Russia is acting opportunistically in the region and is not taking Israel's interests into consideration, but it is sensitive to the potential damage that Jerusalem can cause it and is willing to make adjustments in order to minimize the dangers involved.

Following the decision to attack Hezbollah and as part of its powerful response against Iran, Israel's use of force has effectively begun to pose a threat to Russian assets (its military and political base in Syria, Iran's stability as a secure and reliable supplier for Russia, and more) and contributed to weakening Russia's standing in the region.

So far, Israel has not acted according to this principle, and even now, it is refraining from taking direct action against Russian interests, even when the goal is to push back against diplomatic or media attacks from Russia. However, following the decision to attack Hezbollah and as part of its powerful response against Iran, Israel's use of force has effectively begun to pose a threat to Russian assets (its military and political base in Syria, Iran's stability as a secure and reliable supplier for Russia, and more) and contributed to weakening Russia's standing in the region.

While from Jerusalem's perspective, this was (apparently) not done intentionally or with the goal of undermining Russia's standing in the region, it nevertheless indicates a way to reduce Russia's motivation to act against Israel: Israel should demonstrate power and a willingness to

act against Russian interests wherever Moscow supports Israel's enemies. The first stage is the stability of the actors and geographical regions that the Kremlin relies on—after the fall of Assad, this includes the Russians' shaky position with respect to Syria's new leadership and, of course, the security and internal stability of the regime in Iran. The second stage should be identifying other clear areas where Israel can hurt Russia and block its efforts, for example, regarding the credibility of Russian weapons and pointing out the manipulative nature of sensitive political narratives (for example, "Nazism" in Ukraine). These require thorough analytical development and the formulation of concrete targets that correspond with Israel's political and security objectives, including in the "soft" spheres of building up resilience against hostile foreign influence (such as Russian disinformation campaigns and psychological warfare).

At present, the Trump administration has offered the Kremlin the possibility of a multi-arena inter-power settlement in which Russia is working to maximize the scope of its (compromise) proposals across various global arenas, including the Middle East, in return for securing its core demands regarding ending the war in Ukraine—an issue of paramount importance for the Kremlin. To this end, if the negotiations proceed successfully, Russia may demonstrate a willingness to decrease—temporarily and for the purpose of reaching an agreement on Ukraine only—its involvement in supporting anti-Western forces throughout the region, including Hamas, Iran, the Houthis, and the Shiite militias, and offer a constructive approach regarding American efforts to resolve the regional conflicts. These offers have not yet been made (except for the Russian offer to Iran

to mediate between Tehran and Washington, which has not yet borne fruit), but if the first stages of the negotiations between the American and Russian teams are successful, they will probably be made soon.

Israel must understand that this is a purely instrumental move that aims to achieve concessions from the other side (Trump) and not a fundamental, long-term change of strategy, and should not be swayed by Russia's rhetoric. It is important to coordinate with the Americans and to insist on concrete steps from Russia—public criticism of terrorist organizations, transferring information or other assistance to curb their activities, withdrawing forces and ceasing cooperation with destabilizing actors (such as the Houthis), cooperation on international mechanisms to limit hostile activities (a new nuclear deal with Iran)—all without expanding Russia's capabilities in the arena, which may be leveraged at later stages.

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The Socioeconomic Conduct of the Ultra-Orthodox Sector as a Risk to Israel's National Security

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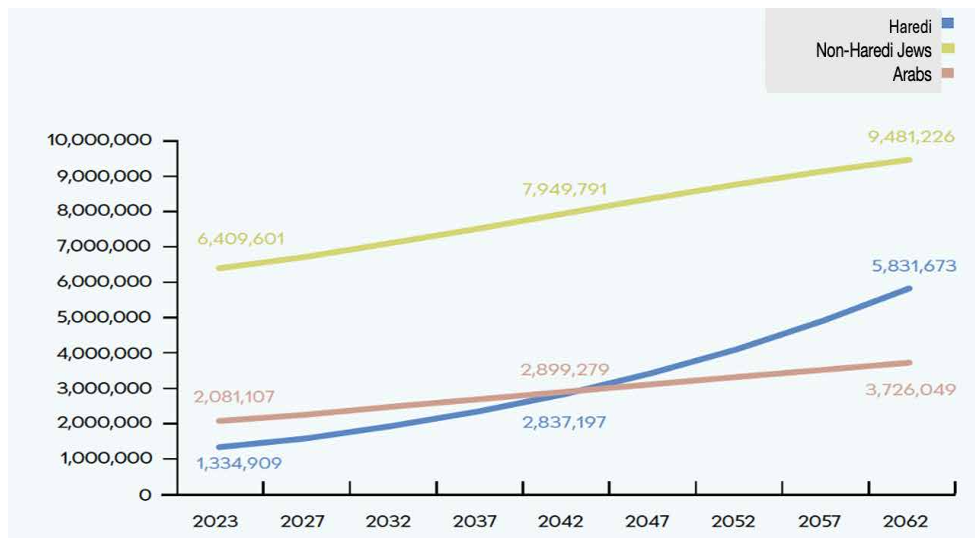
Our argument in this article is that the challenge of integrating the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community into Israeli society impacts national security from a perspective that has not been addressed until now—namely, its detrimental effect on Israel's ability to maintain a modern, productive economy capable of generating the output necessary to support significant defense expenditures. These expenditures are a prerequisite for sustaining a modern military and, therefore, for the survival of the state. To substantiate this claim, an analysis is presented focusing on the following aspects: Damage to GDP—a gap in state revenue generation through taxes; high transfer payments from the state to the ultra-Orthodox sector, including allowances and balancing grants; the non-participation of the ultra-Orthodox in the security burden, which intensifies the load on productive groups and increases the economic cost of reserve and regular military service. The article concludes with proposed solutions to the problem.

Keywords: Ultra-Orthodox sector, defense expenditure, GDP, transfer payments, defense economy

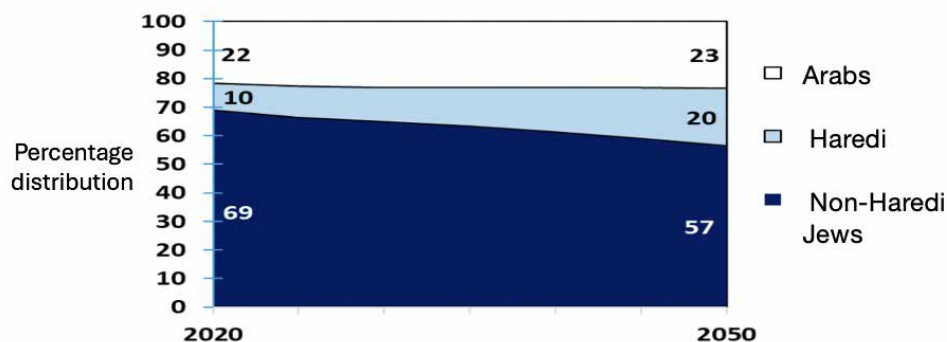
Introduction

Much has been written over the years, especially recently, about the non-participation of the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community in bearing the burden of national security. This issue has broad social and moral implications, rooted in the exemption from military service granted at the establishment of the state to a limited number of yeshiva students, which was expanded without numerical limitation in 1977. Currently, during the Swords of Iron war, this exemption applies to approximately 12,000 yeshiva students annually (a total of about 63,000 draft-eligible yeshiva students are exempt at this point in time).

The societal problem has been amplified during the war, given the number of fallen and wounded—both physically and mentally—the exhaustion of regular combat soldiers, and the enormous burden placed on reservists. This article does not deal with the issue of drafting the ultra-Orthodox, which we hope will be resolved through legislative changes and their conscription like other Jews in the state. Instead, it provides a different perspective on the connection between the ultra-Orthodox sector and national security. This article is based on two fundamental premises:

Chart 1. Population Forecast by Population Group, 2023–2062 (in absolute numbers)

Source: [The Annual Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel 2023](#)

Chart 2. Composition of the Population by Major Ethno-Religious Groups, Ages 20–64, Israel 2020–2050

Source: [The Future of Israeli and Jewish Demography](#)

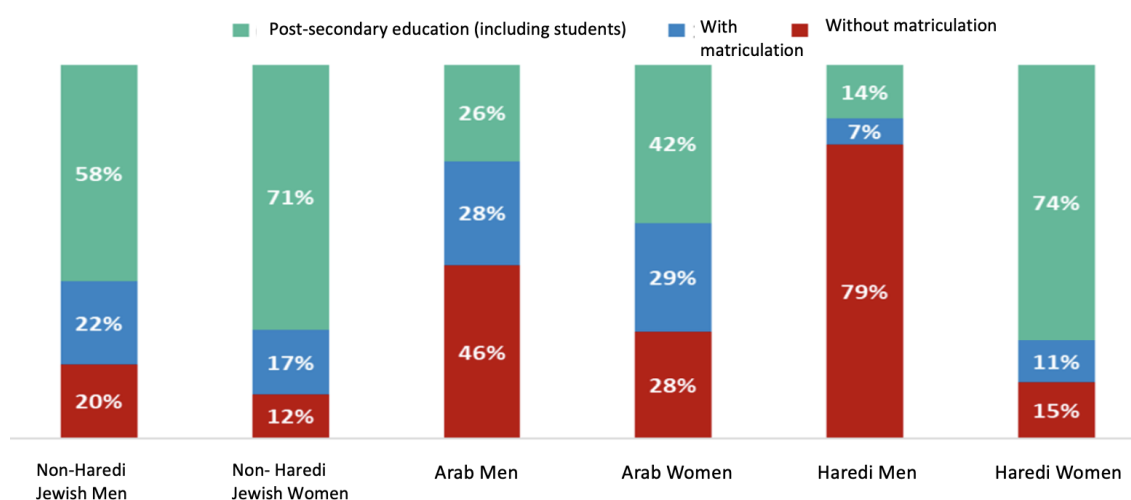
- For Israel to survive in the Middle East, it needs a modern military equipped with advanced weaponry on a large scale and staffed by high-quality, well-trained personnel capable of operating it.
- To sustain such a military, Israel requires a modern, productive economy capable of generating sufficient output to support significant defense expenditures with minimal strain on the economy.

The article argues that the ultra-Orthodox sector undermines Israel's economy in three direct economic ways and one indirect social way. Given the second premise, this economic harm

translates into harm to national security. The three direct economic ways are:

1. Damage to GDP—A gap in state revenue generation through taxes.
2. High transfer payments from the state to the ultra-Orthodox sector, including allowances and balancing grants.
3. Non-participation in the security burden, which increases the load on productive groups and the economic cost of reserve and regular military service.

All these constitute economic harms that we will attempt to quantify later. Additionally, there is another indirect harm of great importance,

Chart 3. Distribution of Education Levels by Population Group, 2022, Ages 25–34

Source: Education Levels of Young People and Their Implications

though difficult to quantify: the fact that the ultra-Orthodox sector's non-participation in the economic burden contributes to the hardships of life in Israel in various aspects and pushes [productive citizens to leave the country](#).

It should be noted that there is a partial similarity between the economic harm caused by the ultra-Orthodox sector and that caused by the Arab sector. However, there are significant differences: The ultra-Orthodox sector seeks to continue its current patterns, while the Arab sector is moving in the opposite direction—making an increasing contribution to the economy, motivated by a desire to improve living standards, reduce family size (and thus lower child allowances), and currently, by law, is not a significant potential pool for military service.

The Impact on Israel's Economy:¹ Damage to Growth and Reduction of GDP

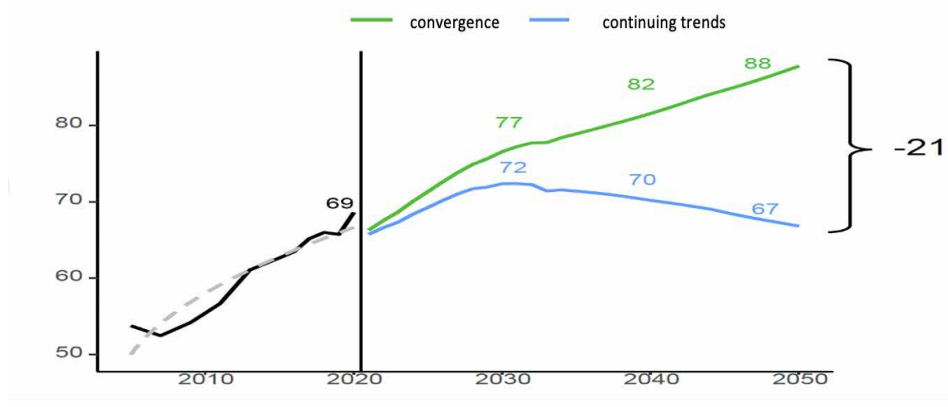
According to estimates by the Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2023, the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) population in Israel, based on self-definition, numbered approximately 1,335,000 people, constituting 13.6% of the total population. By 2030, it is expected to reach 16% of the total population. The annual natural growth rate of the [ultra-Orthodox population](#) has been 4.2% since 2009.

The proportion of ultra-Orthodox individuals in Israel's working-age population (65–20) is [expected to double](#) by 2050.

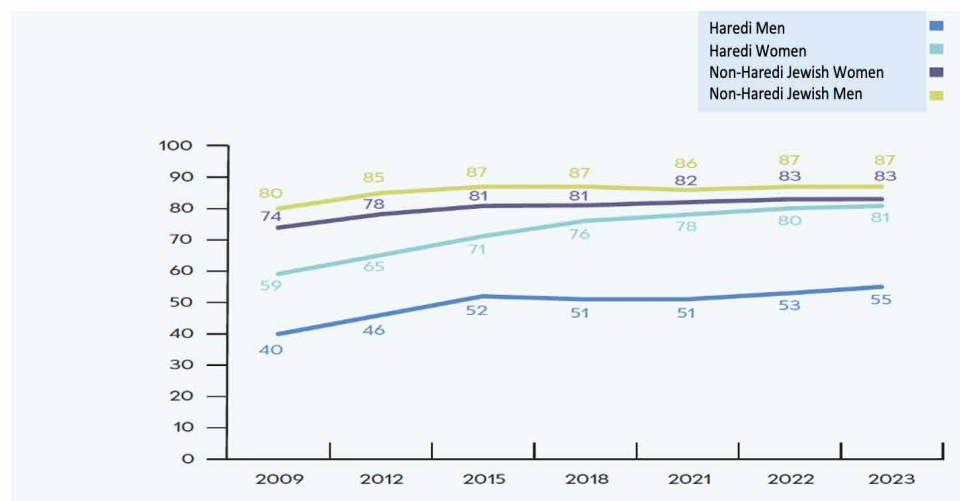
This figure has significant implications for GDP potential due to the low participation of the ultra-Orthodox in the workforce and the low level of education within this community, which affects wages.

Ultra-Orthodox Education: In the 2022–2023 school year, approximately 390,000 students studied in ultra-Orthodox primary and secondary education. They comprised 26% of all students in Hebrew education and 20% of all students in Israel. However, the percentage of ultra-Orthodox [students eligible for a matriculation certificate](#) among 12th-grade students is very low, standing at only 16%, compared to an eligibility rate of 86% in state and state-religious education. The percentage of those eligible for a matriculation certificate meeting university admission requirements (at least four units in English) is even lower, at just 10% in ultra-Orthodox-supervised education.

In the 2022–2023 academic year, approximately 16,700 ultra-Orthodox students studied in academic institutions, constituting 5% of all students studying in Israel that year. Chart 3 above [demonstrates the distribution of education](#) levels by population groups in Israel as of 2022, for those aged 25–34.

Chart 4. Matriculation Eligibility Rate by Different Scenarios

Source: Israel 2050: Demographic Projections

Chart 5. Employment Rates Among Those Aged 25–66, by Population Group and Gender, 2009–2023 (in Percentages)

Note: From 2014 the calculation method is self-defined. Until 2014 the data are for the 25-64 age group. The 2023 data refers to the first three quarters only.

Source: The Annual Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel 2023

The projected trend for Israel's overall human capital, assuming current population and education trends continue, **is a decline in average education levels and a corresponding loss of employment and GDP potential**. Chart 4 shows the development of matriculation eligibility rates according to current trends versus a scenario of the convergence of the Haredi trends with the rest of the population.

Employment: The employment rate of ultra-Orthodox men (53%) in 2022 was significantly lower than that of non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish

men (87%). The gap between employed ultra-Orthodox women and employed non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish women during the same year was much smaller (79.5% compared to 83%).

The Expected Impact on GDP Due to Continuing Trends in Employment, Education, and Wages in the Ultra-Orthodox Population

According to the 2019 [long-term growth model](#) developed by Eyal Argov and Shai Tsur, the factors influencing long-term growth are: the

population of prime working ages (25–65), worker characteristics (primarily participation in employment and education), capital (physical and intangible assets), and total productivity (technology and other factors). Among these, the relevant factor for analyzing the impact of trends in the ultra-Orthodox population on GDP is worker characteristics—namely, participation in the labor force, education, and wages.

The trends outlined above indicate a decline in worker characteristics. The increasing proportion of ultra-Orthodox individuals within the working-age population—given the low employment rate of ultra-Orthodox men and Arab women, low education levels, and low wages, which directly affect productivity—leads to an estimated reduction in growth of up to 6% by 2065, according to Argov and Tsur’s model.

The chief economist analyzed the effects of each sector separately (Arabs and ultra-Orthodox), based on gender, employment, and wages. His conclusions differentiate between the medium and long term. In the medium term, closing the gaps in the Arab sector contributes more to growth, whereas, in the long term, the situation is reversed. Closing the gaps in the ultra-Orthodox sector in the long term would add 0.6% growth annually, equivalent to a 22% increase in the annual growth rate (from an average of 2.7%–3.3% per year). A recent study by the Israel Democracy Institute, focused on the ultra-Orthodox population, estimated a cumulative GDP loss of approximately 10% by 2050, equivalent to about 160 billion NIS in 2023 terms.

The main barriers to the integration of ultra-Orthodox men into the labor market include: A significant lack of basic skills, such as knowledge of English and mathematics, and digital literacy, which hinders academic studies and work in technological fields; dedication to Torah study until age 26 as a condition for receiving an exemption from military service; a negative incentive to join the workforce due to the combination of direct and indirect state support for yeshiva students, late entry into

the labor market, and the absence of adequate training, leading to reliance on occasional, unreported jobs; cultural and social gaps that hinder integration into high-paying industries.

A recent study by the Israel Democracy Institute, focused on the ultra-Orthodox population, estimated a cumulative GDP loss of approximately 10% by 2050, equivalent to about 160 billion NIS in 2023 terms.

Furthermore, a study by Noam Zussman and Avraham Zupnik examined the impact of a one-time reduction in the military exemption age to 22 in 2014 on employment, education, and income. The study looked at different age groups and showed that early entry into the labor market had an overall positive impact on the likelihood of being employed, gaining education, and increasing household income (with a slight decrease in women’s income, but less than the increase in men’s income). The chief economist also addressed the additional impact on ultra-Orthodox employment. His research suggests that improving employment incentives by 1,000 NIS per month would lead to a 4.7 percentage-point increase in the employment rate.

Transfer Payments

Numerous studies focus on the extent of state support for the ultra-Orthodox way of life.² These studies measure direct subsidies aimed at the ultra-Orthodox sector (for yeshiva students and married men, known as avreichim), which are budgeted by the government (in the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Welfare, Ministry of Religious Affairs, etc.), as well as indirect subsidies aimed at those from a lower socioeconomic status. Since the proportion of ultra-Orthodox families in this socioeconomic group is higher than in the general population, they receive indirect support that exceeds their relative share of the population. The main types of support include the avreich

Table 1. Development of recruitment rates in relation to the number of 12th-grade graduates, with an additional 5-year dropout rate.

Recruitment year	Number of recognized 12th-grade students	5 year attrition	Total 18 year olds	Number of recruits	Percentage of recruits from the 18-year-old cohort
2024	11,380	2201	13,581	1,200	8.84%
2023	10,855	2100	12,955	1,200	9.26%
2022	10,650	2060	12,710	1,266	9.96%
2021	9,920	1919	11,839	1,185	10.01%
2020	9,068	1754	10,822	1,193	11.02%
2018	8,318	1609	9,927	1,788	18.01%
2016	7,161	1385	8,546	1,906	22.30%

Source: Processed according to: The Ultra-Orthodox Society Yearbook in Israel 2023; Drafted 18-year-olds and Recruitment Rates; Number of Ultra-Orthodox Recruits in 2023

allowance (depending on marital status), daycare subsidies, child allowances (depending on the number of children and financial status), assistance for needy avreichim with municipal taxes and rent, income support, and more.

In an attempt to examine the full range of support, incentives, and benefits, we can rely on the latest [comprehensive study](#) by Ariel Karlinsky and his colleagues.³ According to the study’s findings, an ultra-Orthodox family receives an average net total support, after deducting all the taxes it pays, of 6,115 NIS per month in 2018 terms, excluding public goods and infrastructure. This translates to about 73,500 NIS per year per family, amounting to **14.5 billion NIS** annually (approximately 200,000 households) on excess support to ultra-Orthodox families.

Increasing the Burden on Military Service

According to [IDF reports](#) from 2019, including projections for 2024, [ultra-Orthodox enlistment](#) in the IDF, as defined by the Security Service Law, is [fairly stable](#) at approximately 1,200 recruits per year. This number is also reflected in various publications by the Israeli Democracy Institute and the Knesset. However, a broader definition indicates the enlistment of about 1,800 ultra-Orthodox soldiers per year.⁴

It is difficult to calculate the enlistment rate among the ultra-Orthodox public for various reasons, including: the differing definitions between the Security Service Law and self-definition, as outlined in the publications of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS); and because the annual enlistment data is calculated based on the recruitment year (July to June of the following year). For an approximation, one can use the number of 12th-grade students in the ultra-Orthodox sector (by school year). To this number, [the dropout rate](#) in recent years, estimated at 3.6% annually, should be added.⁵ The data used in the calculation is a cumulative dropout over five years.

The calculation of the enlistment rate shows a decline of about half a percent each year in recent years, with a steeper decline compared to the years before 2019. The recruits are aged 18-28, so the calculation is not precise, but it serves as an indication of the decline in enlistment among this population.

If the Haredi recruitment rate could be brought in line with that of the rest of the population, to achieve an overall recruitment rate of 50% of the entire population, this could be enough to prevent the planned extension of mandatory military service by four months, or allow for its return to previous levels, again depending on the scope of recruitment,

recruitment age, service period, and service occupation. For example, gradually raising the recruitment rate of the ultra-orthodox to 50% (in line with the rest of the population) for a two-year service period (similar to the Hesder Yeshivot for national religious recruits) at an age when most are still unmarried, with the goal of establishing battalions that can perform routine security operational duties along the borders, could shorten the service requirement for all recruits by four months within four years and also save significant reserve duty days. The expected savings to the economy in the first five years of implementation, due to shortening service and reducing the reserve duty burden, amounts to about 10 billion NIS, excluding the change in transfer payments⁶, and about 4 billion NIS each subsequent year.

The Economic Damage in the Long-Term View.

The combined economic damage in the coming decade (2025-2035) is expected to be relatively low, as a significant portion of the population in the Haredi sector has not yet reached working age. However, in the following decade (2035-2045), the potential damage will reach large proportions. In total calculations for this decade, 60 billion NIS will be lost from GDP, 140 billion NIS from transfer payments, and 40 billion NIS from regular service and reserve costs—totaling approximately 240 billion NIS over the decade. This means a loss of about one and a quarter percent of GDP, which is significant, especially considering that the [defense budget](#) before the war was less than 5% of GDP, or roughly a third of the defense budget (more than the volume of American aid). It should be noted that much of the loss is already “lost” and cannot be fixed, since if in the preceding decade Haredi education did not include core studies, these students will not be able to integrate productively into the economy.

In the introduction, three direct economic factors impacting national security were mentioned, and one indirect factor. The indirect

danger from the worsening situation is that, due to the inequality in the burden across all sectors, productive citizens who serve in the IDF may leave the country. Such a situation would further diminish Israel’s economic base and make its survival even more difficult.

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A Look to the Future

What can be done to prevent or reduce the economic damage caused by the ultra-Orthodox sector to the security of the state? The following proposals are in the fields of education and knowledge. They are focused on the economic aspect, but could also contribute to addressing the growing need for equality in the burden of national service.

One group of responses is “positive” and entirely dependent on the implementation of core studies in the ultra-Orthodox sector, such as rewarding ultra-Orthodox parents who send their children to such educational institutions. The basis for change in the education sector may be the cancellation of the various streams of education in Israel and the creation of a unified education stream with basic and modern education for all, which will be determined by the Ministry of Education according to an analysis of the future needs of the economy, and will include additions tailored to different lifestyles (Jewish, Arab, religious, ultra-Orthodox, traditional, secular, atheist).

Options based on the education reforms:

1. Creating high-paying work frameworks in the ultra-Orthodox sector while maintaining cultural differentiation between the employees within them—who will be purely ultra-Orthodox and will pursue limited

hours of Torah study—and the workers in the general public.

2. Temporarily subsidizing ultra-Orthodox workers entering the productive labor market through “retraining” incentives, so that this is more profitable than their work in non-productive professions or low-wage jobs.
3. Continuing to allow ultra-Orthodox individuals to learn a civilian profession while serving in the military.

A second group of responses concerns economic sanctions, as well as other areas:

1. Sanctions of the type currently in place—reducing economic rights that have been granted until now, such as daycare subsidies.
2. New sanctions in various areas of life, for example, raising fees for services in the health system according to the non-productive work of parents of working age.
3. Creating a connection between paying taxes to the state and receiving services from the state, distinguishing between those who need services due to limitations not under the individual’s control (such as disability, illness, old age, inability to be employed due to a temporary crisis in a particular sector, like tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic) and those who are “voluntary poor,” who do not work for personal convenience and are supported by the state.
4. A more extreme proposal is social and governmental separation, in the spirit of [Eugene Kendal and Ron Tzur’s proposal](#) to create a new federal regime model, which would allow groups with conflicting values in Israeli society to have a formal right to autonomy concerning their values and way of life, and to stop feeling coerced or needing to defend themselves.

Summary

In order to survive as a country and as individuals, the State of Israel requires a modern army, and for that, a modern economy. A continuous increase in the absolute size of

the Haredi sector and its relative size within the population of Israel, along with its continued non-participation in productive economic activity, rising transfer payments, continued economic burden from non-conscription into the military, and shortage of manpower in regular and reserve service (as well as income concealment in the black market)—all of these directly harm the state’s ability to maintain such an army. The scenario presented in the article indicates a gap of one and a quarter percent in GDP due to these factors. Cities in Israel that have undergone a process of Haredization have dropped in socio-economic rankings. A prominent example is [Jerusalem](#), which dropped from a ranking (with 10 as the highest and 1 as the lowest) of 5 in 1995 to a ranking of 2 in 2019, while Arab neighborhoods strengthened due to a decline in birth rates. [Safed](#), which dropped in 2010 from a ranking of 4 to 3, further dropped to a ranking of 2 in [2017](#). These cities have turned from productive cities into needy cities. In the ongoing process we are facing, the entire state could become a “needy state.” The danger is that long before that, Israel could be defeated on the battlefield due to the gaps in its economic capacity to maintain the required modern army for its survival.

The Israeli public debate about social-moral inequality in the security burden, arising from the refusal of the Haredi population to enlist in the military, should therefore also address the economic harm to security caused by the Haredi sector, and it should be done sooner rather than later.

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Notes

- 1 The economic analysis in this section is primarily based on research conducted by Sasson Haddad at the Jewish People Policy Institute, as part of a special project led by Prof. Yedidia Stern: *"The Recruitment of Ultra-Orthodox: Military, Economic, and Legal Aspects – A Framework for Integrating the Ultra-Orthodox into the IDF,"* 2024, unpublished. Hereinafter: Stern, 2024.
- 2 Additional examples: [On taxes and wonders: Distribution of state income and expenditure among households in Israel, the importance of financial incentives for the employment rate of ultra-Orthodox men.](#)
- 3 A draft is due to be published in the *Quarterly for Economics*.
- 4 The number 1,200 refers to the definition of an ultra-Orthodox person in the Military Service Law (at least two years of study in a "yeshiva ktana", which is an ultra-Orthodox yeshiva for high school ages, and only institutions recognized by the Ministry of Defense). The IDF has a different method of categorization, which includes other ultra-Orthodox institutions, according to which it recruits 1,800 ultra-Orthodox individuals per year.
- 5 In the document linked, there are two issues: The issue of not counting dropouts and the issue of which date the year is counted from. However, according to our understanding, the overlap issue is minor because the recruitment data refers to graduates of a specific academic year.
- 6 The assessment based on the economic analysis in Stern, 2024.



David Ben-Gurion, Kemal Ataturk, and the Shaping of Israeli Security Policy—A Historical Perspective

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The Image of Ataturk in the Eyes of Ben-Gurion

A few months after he resigned from the government (June 16, 1963), a Turkish newspaper asked David Ben-Gurion to pen an article on the character of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. Ben-Gurion wrote an article replete with praise: “Without a doubt,” he wrote, “Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century prior to World War II and one of the greatest and boldest reformers to emerge in any nation” (Ben-Gurion, 1963).

Kemal Ataturk combined bold and balanced military and political leadership with groundbreaking social reformist policy. It was this combination in his personality and leadership that appears to have captivated Ben-Gurion.

Ben-Gurion lived and worked as a political figure through one of the stormiest and most fateful periods of the modern era. As a young adult he experienced World War I, and as a major political figure in the Zionist movement he experienced World War II, the Holocaust that was intended to wipe the entire Jewish people off the face of the earth, the first use of nuclear weapons in human history, the establishment of the League of Nations and then the United Nations, and the arrangements that shaped the international system following World War II.

He was well aware of the leadership of many international figures who faced serious crises and overcame them, such as Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, and others. Most of these leaders focused on political and security activity, areas in which they achieved great successes for their nations and for humanity as a whole. Kemal Ataturk, on the other hand, combined bold and balanced military and political leadership with groundbreaking social reformist policy. It was this combination in his personality and leadership that appears to have captivated Ben-Gurion.

To some extent, we can say that, in Ataturk, Ben-Gurion saw his own image and his own type of leadership. He too understood, immediately upon the declaration of Israeli statehood, that without social power, military power could neither be built nor take root. Ben-Gurion was very familiar with the Jewish Yishuv that had been established in Palestine before the Declaration of Independence, and he respected and trusted it. In his view, it was a fighting, pioneering Yishuv—advanced, bold, and with boundless commitment to Eretz Israel.

According to Ben-Gurion, members of the Yishuv had adopted a progressive, Western value system. They were committed to the values of democracy and individual freedom; they aspired to establish in Palestine a state with

the most advanced scientific-technological capabilities in the world; they believed that willpower, determination, and perseverance would enable them to meet any challenge that arose—whether socioeconomic or political-defense-oriented in character.

The waves of Jewish immigration (*aliyah*) that arrived in the country following Israel's Declaration of Independence, from Eastern Europe and especially from the Arab countries, worried Ben-Gurion. In his mind's eye, he saw Jews who were still rooted in a Diasporic mentality, and he was very concerned about their ability to meet the difficult challenges they faced in terms of both economics and security. Moreover, practically all of them had come from countries lacking a tradition of democracy, and Ben-Gurion was apprehensive about their possibly negative influence on the democratic character of the state of Israel.

In the security domain, he feared that they would have difficulty holding the land against waves of infiltrators who may try to enter Israel to commit robbery and murder. Indeed, in many instances, leaders of local authorities, development towns, and frontier settlements in which new immigrants—primarily from Arab countries—lived along the country's borders, made it clear that if the infiltrations continued and the IDF did not provide a suitable response, people would leave their homes and move elsewhere.

To contend with these dangers, Ben-Gurion initiated a system of male and female volunteers, veterans of the Yishuv, who moved to live temporarily in the settlements that were populated by new immigrants. He hoped that in this way the members of the established Yishuv would demonstrate their solidarity with the new immigrants and dissuade them from making good on their threats of abandonment.

In his diaries, his articles, and his speeches, which were too numerous to count, Ben-Gurion describes various aspects of the social and ethical reforms that Ataturk brought to Turkey. Ben-Gurion relates that he was a university

student in Istanbul two years before the outbreak of World War I and knew Ottoman Turkey well, including that of Abdul Hamid II and that of the Young Turks. In the 1930s, he writes, he went back to Istanbul to visit and “was almost unable to recognize the people” (Ben-Gurion, 1963).

He also writes that during his studies at the University of Constantinople, no women set foot in the institution, but that the situation changed in the 1930s. During his last visit, he noted that the university was full of male and female students. During his years of study at the university, the women would cover their faces with a veil, as is customary in Islam, but some years later they walked around with their faces uncovered, like the men. The language had also changed; it was no longer based on the Arabic alphabet, as it had been previously (Ben-Gurion, 1963).

For more than a century, Ben-Gurion writes, Turkey was known as “the sick man on the Bosphorus”—no country wanted ties with it, and everyone talked about its division into sub-states. Under Ataturk's leadership, Turkey transformed its status. After repelling the Greek invasion, it appeared as a “young man at full strength, and instead of being surrounded by the hatred of its neighbors, both near and far, the new Turkey was the friend and ally of all its neighbors” (Ben-Gurion, 1963).

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Ataturk's strategic achievements gave expression to Ben-Gurion's realistic worldview, which rested on the assumption that relationships in the international arena are shaped by interests and power. During his tenure as prime minister, Ben-Gurion saw the validity of this worldview expressed in many contexts. This article focuses on two examples.

Ataturk's strategic achievements gave expression to Ben-Gurion's realistic worldview, which rested on the assumption that relationships in the international arena are shaped by interests and power.

The first pertains to the decision to declare the State of Israel on May 15, 1948. The decision was made with the knowledge that the balance of power gave clear superiority to the Arab side. A Jewish Yishuv numbering 600,000 people would have to contend with at least some of the Arab countries, with a combined population of tens of millions. The Yishuv's situation in terms of military equipment was also inferior to that of the Arabs.

At the same time, at the diplomatic level, this decision was clearly at odds with the position of the American administration, and unequivocal threats of an embargo and the denial of economic aid hung in the air. Moreover, Ben-Gurion and the rest of the Israeli leadership clearly understood that an Israeli loss in the campaign would not resemble a "normal" military defeat, in which the winners take control of the conquered area but leave the population in place.

In the Israeli-Arab case, no one doubted that the Arab enemy would seek to destroy the Yishuv in its entirety—women, men, and children. This was at a time when the memory of the Holocaust, which had occurred primarily in Europe just a few years earlier, was still fresh in the Israeli national memory.

Above all, the decision was actually made at a time when the military echelon, led by acting IDF Chief of Staff Yigal Yadin, had reservations, even objected to the move, and explicitly stated that Israel's victory in the perilous campaign gradually gaining momentum against it was not at all certain. All members of the leadership realized that Ben-Gurion himself and many of his colleagues had no real military knowledge that could enable them to present a position contradicting that of the Chief of Staff.

This was the situation that faced Ben-Gurion on the eve of the decision to declare statehood. It is important to note that the decision was not necessarily a move in a zero sum game—to exist or to cease existing. His partners in both the leadership and the military echelon proposed suspending the decision for a few months and offered convincing reasons, but Ben-Gurion refused. He believed that the target date for the declaration was "a golden opportunity," that must be seized at once, fearing that otherwise it would never happen. In retrospect, Ben-Gurion's decision was proven correct. The Jewish Yishuv went to war and paid a heavy price, with almost 6,000 dead, but emerged the victor.

The second example pertains to the Sinai Campaign (October 1956). As we know, the Sinai campaign was launched in cooperation with two colonial superpowers—Britain and France—and was conducted against a developing Third World nation: Egypt. Some feared that this cooperation would result in a rupture between the countries of Africa and Asia, which were starting to develop the International Organization for Non-Aligned Countries under the leadership of Egypt (Nasser), India (Nehru), and Yugoslavia (Tito). They recalled the severe anti-Israel resolutions that were passed by the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states of 1953 in Indonesia. They feared that now there would be even harsher resolutions against Israel, but in practice all their fears proved to be unfounded. Among the countries of Asia and Africa, it turned out, admiration of Israel increased following its victory over Egypt, and the Sinai Campaign was followed by closer relations between the nations of Asia and the State of Israel.

Ben-Gurion acted similarly with respect to other strategic issues that were on the agenda during his years in office, including the decision to move the government's offices to Jerusalem in response to the U.N. Security Council resolution regarding the internationalization of Jerusalem in December 1949, and Israel's development of a nuclear option.

In his article in the Turkish newspaper, Ben-Gurion continued:

It is hard to find in recent centuries even one country that has experienced within a short time such far-reaching changes to its culture, society, internal structure, and international standing as occurred in Turkey. The instigator of this renewal and fortifying change, examples of which are few and far between in the history of nations, was Mustafa Kemal [known by the name of] Ataturk. He was a brilliant soldier, a courageous statesman with long-term vision, and a leader who was both daring and cautious, undeterred by any difficulty in the cause of liberating and advancing his people, and who was never intoxicated by his successes or his victories (Ben-Gurion, 1963).

Ben-Gurion went even further, defining Ataturk as:

...a mighty fighter known for eradicating the enemies seeking to terminate the independence and the unity of his homeland, and for his ability to turn yesterday's hater into a friend and ally, without seeking revenge or brooding over injuries from the past. He was a loyal patriot who was not afraid to stand alone against the entire world; he was able to raise his divided and oppressed nation that had been let down by its failed leaders to the highest levels of unity, liberty, and faith in its own strength. A lone ruler, whose leadership was based on the trust and commitment of the people to democracy and liberty—that was Ataturk, who renewed the youth of the Turkish people, secured its independence and unity, saved it from the decayed legacy of the Middle Ages,

and marked out a safe and reliable road for its internal and external advancement (Ben-Gurion, 1963).

Indeed, commentators who examined Ataturk's revolution also focused on the rare combination of military and social leadership that were clearly reflected in his leadership. In this context, David Siton wrote the following in the newspaper *Haboker*:

The revolution instigated by Ataturk [...] was, first and foremost, intended to liberate Anatolia from the burden of foreign occupation. Thanks to the strong national spirit beating in the hearts of the Turkish people, even during the country's most difficult days, when it was divided and torn, Mustafa Kemal managed to expel from its borders all the foreign occupiers who plotted to fragment the state and divide it amongst themselves (Siton, 1950, p. 3).

However, Siton continues, Ataturk did not regard the expulsion of foreigners as the summit of his aspirations. He sought to instigate a fundamental revolution in the life of the Turkish nation in order to heal and strengthen it, so that it could become a normal nation. As a first step, he terminated the Caliphate regime in his country. He expelled the Sultan from Istanbul and separated religion from state, and in doing so, he neutralized the influence of the fanatical religious leaders who were the progenitors of the corrupt Ottoman regime. Ataturk's revolution also encompassed social aspects, including women's liberation from the shackles of Muslim extremism, purging the language of Arabic foundations, instituting economic processes already established in Europe, and opening the gates to European culture. "All this," he concluded, "healed the Turkish nation and introduced a new spirit to the country" (Siton, 1950, p. 3).

Turkey's political, military, and economic power; its close ties to the West, especially the United States; alongside its democratic character, turned relations with Turkey into a strategic asset for the State of Israel in the 1950s. Against the background of the rise of Arab nationalism under the leadership of Egypt's President Nasser, and the policy of isolation and boycott which the Arab states implemented against Israel, Ben-Gurion initiated the Alliance of the Periphery, which included Turkey, Morocco, Ethiopia, and Iran, among others.

Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel de-facto in March 1949. Even prior to that, it enabled Jews to emigrate from Turkey to the State of Israel, although it knew that doing so could harm its relations with the Arab countries. Later, Turkey allowed the opening of an Israeli consulate in the country and the appointment of a Turkish envoy to Israel. Israel's victory over the Arab countries was a central component of the closer relations between the two countries (Lerman, 1950; Podeh, 2022, p. 296).

Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel de-facto in March 1949.

Ben-Gurion's Fear of the Rise of an "Arab Ataturk"

For Ben-Gurion, his admiration of Ataturk's leadership was deeply significant in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict. To understand this context, we must return to the period following Israel's War of Independence and the challenges it posed to Israeli decision makers, led by Ben-Gurion.

Just a few months after the end of the War of Independence, Ben-Gurion found himself in a minority position compared to other members of the leadership and a large majority of the public. Everywhere he looked, he saw sentiments of satisfaction, joy, and pride at the

great victory. All of this, of course, co-existed with great pain at the heavy cost paid by the Yishuv to achieve that victory. Ben-Gurion shared in this sense of satisfaction but was also cautious in his optimism.

It was, without a doubt, an "absolute victory." At the end of the war, the IDF controlled an area 25% larger than what had been allocated to the Jewish state as part of the partition plan approved by the United Nations General Assembly on November 29, 1947. Moreover, by the end of the war, it emerged that 700,000 Arabs had left the country and become refugees in the neighboring Arab countries, thereby allowing the Jewish Yishuv to achieve its dream of establishing a Jewish democratic state with a solid Jewish majority.

At the end of the war, the armies of Israel and the Arab countries were exhausted, but the IDF was in a position to continue fighting and seize control of additional territory. A plan for continuation of the fighting was presented to the state leadership for a decision, with the aim of conquering the area of the Old City of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron. The plan was ultimately not implemented. As it concerned the question of seizing land that was defined as "ancestral inheritance," serious disagreement arose within the state leadership over the question of who was responsible for the failure to implement the plan. Ben-Gurion, as we know, attached to this 'failure' the words "*bekhiya l'dorot*" (to be lamented for generations), and accused his political rival Moshe Sharett of bearing responsibility (Moshe Sharett & His Legacy, undated).

In any event, the fact that the state leadership regarded continuation of the war and seizure of additional land as a possibility indicates that, at the end of the war, the position of the Arabs was vastly inferior to that of the IDF. The Arabs for their part were well aware of the IDF's superiority and that it was advisable for them to reach a ceasefire as soon as possible.

Ben-Gurion shared in the joy of the victory, but he also had concerns. He feared it would

lead the Yishuv and its leadership to be smug and excessively confident in the IDF's ability. The assessment that was common in many state leadership circles was based on an ostensibly logical assumption: if a small Yishuv with few and limited resources managed to defeat the seven Arab countries that attacked Israel, then we can look to the future with a great deal of security.

Many members and leaders of the Yishuv believed that the passage of time was working in Israel's favor. Over time, there would be massive Jewish immigration to Israel, helping increase the strength of the IDF. The conclusion of the war and the signing of the armistice agreements would almost certainly lead the Western powers to lift, at least partially, the arms embargo against Israel. And most importantly, the defeat of the Arab countries would deter them from thoughts of a war that would certainly end in another Arab defeat.

Ben-Gurion feared this way of thinking. In his eyes, such complacency among the authorities charged with responsibility for state security, posed a genuine risk. He was determined to combat this phenomenon, and to this end he constructed a series of arguments to contend with the danger he saw before him. War, Ben-Gurion maintained, is a phenomenon that is inherent to human history. In other words, human history is in effect an ongoing story of wars with pauses between them. This statement is universal in character, but is particularly applicable to the Israeli-Arab context:

[You believe in] the end of the war. He conducts a kind of virtual dialogue with those who believe in peace. [You know well that] "even if the war ends now [formally], and [even] if [a] peace [treaty] is signed, [the phenomenon of war will continue. The proof is simple]: Has there ever been a war that was not preceded by peace?" (Ben-Gurion, 1948)

The armistice agreements, Ben-Gurion explained to the public, do not ensure peace: "And if someone were to ask me whether there will be war six months from now, I would not say: No" (Knesset Records, 1949, p. 305). He added that the current period "is only a pause [in the fighting] between us and the Arab countries" (Ben-Gurion, 1949a).

This historical assertion, Ben-Gurion believed, applied to human society, and even more so to Israel's relations with the Arab world after the War of Independence. He was skeptical about the rather arrogant assessment, adopted by many in the Yishuv, that the outcome of the war would lead the Arab countries to abandon the path of war and choose the path of peace. In his eyes, this approach reflected Western thinking, and in one of his speeches, he said:

It cannot be assumed that the failure [of the Arabs in the War of Independence] will deter them from their desire to uproot us from our land. They believe, and this belief is not wholly unfounded, that time is on their side and there is no reason to hurry. They have a lot of time. They have an instructive example from this very land—the Crusader conquest in the eleventh century. A Christian state was established and existed for decades, but the Muslim world ultimately overcame it and uprooted it (Ben-Gurion, 1955).

For many years, Ben-Gurion insisted on the need to see reality not from the perspective of Western nations, but rather from the perspective of the Arab nations. What we regard as rational and guaranteed, he emphasized again and again, does not necessarily appear to be so in the Arab world. They have other codes of behavior, based largely on the concepts of revenge and the defense of honor: "The Arab nations were beaten by us. Will they forget it

quickly? Six hundred thousand defeated thirty million. Will they forget the insult? We must assume that they have a sense of honor [...] Can we be confident that they will not seek to take revenge against us?" (Ben-Gurion, 1948).

Moreover, Ben-Gurion refused to accept the sense of self-satisfaction that was developing in the Yishuv, together with the admiration for the IDF and its conduct of the War of Independence. He believed that the main reason for the victory in the war was the severe divisions that characterized the Arab world at the time, particularly between Egypt and Jordan, and the corrupt nature of the Arab regimes during the years in question: "We were victorious not because our army performs miracles, but rather because the Arab army is rotten. Must this rot last forever? Would it be impossible for an Arab Mustafa Kemal to arise?" (Ben-Gurion, 1948).

Indeed, Ben-Gurion was gripped by what could be referred to as an obsessive fear, based on the widespread sentiments of self-confidence after the war. He was extremely critical of those who underestimated the Arabs and viewed them as backward people who would never be able to contend with the human quality of IDF soldiers, with their scientific and technological abilities, and especially with the degree of motivation and readiness for sacrifice pulsing within them: "Our neighbors," he wrote to Chief of Staff Yadin in October 1949, "who we can assume will be better prepared and more unified [...] We must raise a fighting nation and train every man and woman, every youth and elderly person, to defend themselves in the hour of need" (Ben-Gurion, 1949c).

Ben-Gurion feared the emergence of a charismatic Arab leader who could unify the Arab peoples against Israel. This phenomenon, he noted, had already occurred in the Arab world in the distant past. Muhammad appeared suddenly in the seventh century, and through the power of his charismatic personality and the tidings of the new religious faith he carried with him, "almost overnight turned the unknown, helpless, and divided Arab tribes into a unified

force, a conqueror which since then has changed the face of much of the world and achieved for Arab culture conquests unlike almost any other in all of human history" (Ben-Gurion, 1951).

And of course, the major example behind many of his statements was that of Kemal Ataturk:

I was a student in Turkey before World War I, and I knew the failed Turkish regime well...I thought it was a corrupt and hopeless state...And then all of a sudden...a new spirit arose in the people; a man appeared whose name they did not know...and breathed a new soul into the Turkish nation, rose up against the subjugation imposed upon it by the victors, and defeated the Greeks...It expelled the entire Greek population from Asia Minor, where they had lived for thousands of years...And the Turks, who had been humiliated and oppressed... took courage and became an independent, proud, and respected nation (Ben-Gurion, 1949b).

Such concerns were also common in various circles within Israel. In December 1952, an expert on the Arab world wrote:

From many perspectives, Turkey serves as an example for regimes in the Arab lands. In Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the army is currently openly controlling the country; ...and in Jordan, the Legion are the real power behind the scenes. General Naguib advocates far-reaching reforms... [the rulers of Syria and Iraq] are also interested, ostensibly, in establishing Kemalist regimes (Hiram, 1952, p. 2).

A short time after Gamal Abdul Nasser seized power in Egypt in the Free Officers' Coup, Ben-Gurion began to recognize that Nasser was a leader on the scale of Ataturk. He estimated

that, because of his vision and his immense charisma, he had the ability to unify the Arab countries under his leadership. Were this to happen, Ben-Gurion worried, the existence of the State of Israel would be in real danger. In one of his speeches after the Sinai Campaign, he acknowledged that:

I was very concerned that such a man [like Ataturk] could also arise among the Arab nations. And such a man has emerged, and, at the moment, there is a personal focus for the national aspirations of the Arab nations; it is Gamal Abdul Nasser...he has become the expectation, the bearer of hope for the unity and empowerment of the Arab nations. And one of his goals, albeit not the only one, is the destruction of the State of Israel (Ben-Gurion, 1958).

Summation and Conclusions

The discussion surrounding Ataturk's personality and leadership, and the danger of such a leader rising to power in the Arab world, reflects the diverse layers of David Ben-Gurion's leadership and its significance to this day.

Ben-Gurion's personality combined two ostensibly contradictory characteristics: on the one hand, he was a courageous leader, who sometimes appeared to many to be moving in an almost foolhardy direction, far beyond Israel's capabilities; on the other hand, his personality also included a deep recognition of the limitations of the power of the Israeli state and major concerns over moves that could drag the country into a military confrontation.

His statements regarding Ataturk unequivocally reveal this duality in Ben-Gurion's personality and his political worldview. They express his belief that every nation holds within itself immense powers. Wise and prescient leadership is measured, among other things, by how far it understands these forces and can use them to advance the interests of the state.

This perception also encompasses the belief that even when nations are at a low point, like Turkey prior to the establishment of Ataturk's leadership, they must not fall into an abyss of despair. Wise, effective leadership can extract them from their difficulties and raise their status, just as Ataturk had done.

At the same time, Ben-Gurion's statements regarding Ataturk's personality and leadership gave expression to the cautious, and perhaps even fearful aspects of Ben-Gurion's personality and leadership. He lived through the difficult days of the declaration of statehood and the war against the Arab countries completely devoid of any illusion that it was possible to reach a peace treaty with the Arab world. Nevertheless, the vast archive he left behind reveals extensive documentation of his contacts with Arab leaders, for the purpose of establishing peace and calm in Israel. Ben-Gurion says that he presented them with a formula for an agreement that would benefit both them and the State of Israel. Cooperation between the two peoples—with Israel contributing technological knowledge and scientific advancement, and the Arab world bringing natural resources and manpower—would lead to prosperity in the region for both nations. How great was his disappointment when figures who were considered moderate in the Arab world, most significantly Musa al-Alami, rejected his proposals out of hand:

Like all Zionists, I too once believed in the theory that our work would bring blessings to the Arab nations...Then I was naïve to think that the Arabs thought as we do...and I spoke with Arab leaders in Israel and in all the neighboring countries...[However,] when I spoke with one Arab, an educated and honest man [Musa al-Alami], about the blessing that our presence brings them, he said to me: That is true, but we do not want this blessing. We choose for the land to remain poor, meagre, and empty, until

we learn to do what you do. If it takes another 100 years, we will wait another 100 years (Knesset Records, 1960).

Against this background, during all his years in office Ben-Gurion made sure to caution security personnel against complacency, smugness, excessive self-confidence, downplaying the capabilities of the enemy, and the unbridled buildup of our military capabilities. It was Ben-Gurion who, from every podium, warned that the Czech-Egyptian arms deal endangered the very existence of the State of Israel. It was he who changed the conception of the activity of the German scientists in Egypt at the beginning of the 1960s and understood it as a serious threat against Israel, while many within the Israeli security establishment tended to belittle its severity.

During all his years in office Ben-Gurion made sure to caution security personnel against complacency, smugness, excessive self-confidence, downplaying the capabilities of the enemy, and the unbridled buildup of our military capabilities.

At the end of the Six Day War and the great military victory that resulted, the response by the Israeli leadership was a far cry from Ben-Gurion's cautious approach. Prime Minister and Defense Minister Levi Eshkol was unable to restrain the immense euphoria that erupted instantly, once it became clear that the IDF had succeeded in defeating three Arab countries—Egypt, Syria, and Jordan—and had seized control of vast territories: the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights.

After the war, Major General Ezer Weizman, then Chief of Operations on the General Staff, said:

I think that the Arabs have many good qualities of their own...However, their fitness for war is a different matter... The time has come for them to

understand that war is not for them... Even today you can see Jews here and there who are beset by a fear of gentiles. We must stop being afraid of gentiles once and for all and start understanding that the world fears us more, because it recognizes our greatness much more than we do (Ya'alon, 2017, pp. 97-98).

Major General Yehoshafat Harkabi went further, stating:

War is a social act. The ability of a nation to fight depends largely on the ability of its citizens to work together. The Egyptian nation is not a [unified] organism, but rather a mass of individuals acting as individuals according to their own personal interests, and not as a group, according to collective ideas. They are therefore unable to [conduct] an effective war (Shalom, 2023, p. 96).

Elsewhere, he spoke similarly:

In Arab society, there is almost no unity. Each person acts for himself and feels alienated from others...In the IDF, each soldier is confident [that if he is injured], his comrades will not leave him on the battlefield. The Egyptian soldier is convinced that his comrades will abandon him. The result is that an IDF unit reacts to fire in a unified manner, and the Egyptian unit reacts by crumbling...War demands group action (Shalom, 2023, pp. 96-97).

The smugness of the political and military leadership in Israel continued in subsequent years, right up to the present. It led Israel's security establishment to maintain the fixed mindset that " Hamas has been deterred" (Zitun and Halabi, 2023). This assessment constituted

the basis for the complacency that preceded Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023. This sense of self-confidence was also present on Israel's northern border and is what led to the policy of containment in the face of Hezbollah's immense accumulation of strength, which seriously endangered the State of Israel, and to the belief implied by former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, that there was no reason to worry, as "the rockets will rust" (Harlap, 2024).

Ben-Gurion's warnings after Israel's War of Independence, and throughout his years in office, regarding the danger of an Ataturk-like leader rising to power in an Arab country and unifying them in a military action against Israel, is one example of the great caution that was typical of his leadership. It is what led Israel's security system to prepare effectively for a clash with the Arab enemy and under no circumstances to belittle its capability. This worldview is what granted Israel victories on the battlefield, strategic successes, and relatively long periods of calm, enabling the state to develop its economy and to implement strategic warning systems that strengthen its security even now. Unfortunately, some of the Israeli leaders who followed Ben-Gurion did not adopt these aspects of his leadership and methods.

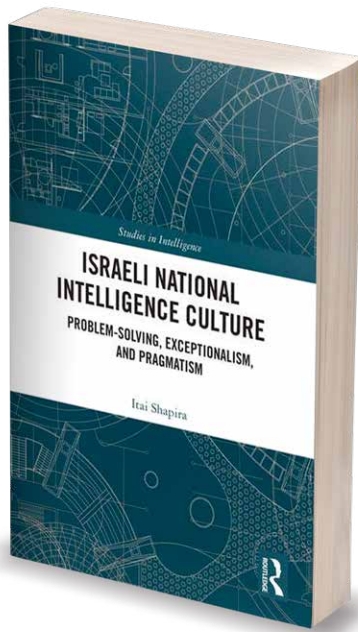
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Beyond Operations: Analyzing the Cultural Foundations of Israeli Intelligence

Evangelia Akritidou

Israeli National Intelligence Culture: Problem-Solving, Exceptionalism, and Pragmatism

By: Itai Shapira

Publisher: Routledge

Year: 2025

Pages: 258

Itai Shapira, a retired colonel from Israeli Defense Intelligence (IDI), has over 25 years of experience at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. His book expands on his doctoral dissertation to offer a unique insight into Israeli intelligence

culture, by analyzing the origins, traits and manifestations of the Israeli case. Shapira, an Israeli practitioner-turned-scholar, explores how Israelis perceive and practice intelligence, moving beyond the traditional historical focus seen in most books on the subject. The book is based on 34 interviews with elite active and former Israeli experts from Israel Defense Intelligence (IDI)¹, the Mossad (Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations) and the Shabak,² conducted between 2021 and 2023 (prior to the Swords of Iron War). A full list of the interviewees can be found in the Appendix on page 248.

The book is structured to explore Israeli intelligence culture through theoretical frameworks, historical context, and policy-oriented analysis. **The first chapter**, “Frameworks,” discusses national intelligence cultures, the research approach and the research questions of the book. **The second chapter** explores the structure of the Israeli intelligence system since its foundation, by providing a short historical outline and detailing the role of each organization (IDI, Mossad and Shabak), the coordination between them, and their pivotal role within Israel’s national security framework. The IDI holds an elevated status and is responsible for Israel’s national intelligence evaluations, as opposed to other countries, where civilian organizations perform that function.³ Meanwhile, the Mossad specializes in foreign intelligence, covert operations and both human and technological intelligence gathering, whereas the Shabak is primarily responsible for internal security, counterterrorism and counterintelligence within Israel and the West Bank. **The third chapter** examines the origins of Israeli national intelligence culture, focusing on strategic culture (including history, society, religion, the constant sense of existential threats, exceptionalism, securitization, military culture, and the Israeli security doctrine), political and organizational culture, as well as the influence of significant traumas. **The fourth**

The IDI holds an elevated status and is responsible for Israel’s national intelligence evaluations, as opposed to other countries, where civilian organizations perform that function.

chapter argues that Israeli intelligence culture reflects broader national values, emphasizing informality, flexibility, and bottom-up initiatives. Practitioners view the lack of structured management as a strength that encourages collaboration and innovation, preferring to present differing assessments to maintain professional independence and integrity, rather than enforcing a unified national intelligence stance. Next, **the fifth chapter** deals with the close connection Israeli intelligence perceives between intelligence and decision-making, as essential for relevance and impact, emphasizing its focus on action and influence, the cultural prioritization of pragmatism and results, and the continuous shift between subcultures, balancing innovation with traditional conservatism. **The sixth chapter**, one of the most fascinating ones, explores how Israeli intelligence balances its traditionally artistic and intuitive approach with a growing openness to advanced technologies and scientific methods, contrasting its cultural focus on human expertise and contextual understanding with the more structured, technology-driven approaches of the U.S. and Britain. **The seventh chapter** explores the Israeli concept of intelligence, characterized by a pragmatic, innovation-driven approach that prioritizes practical experience and adaptive problem-solving over theoretical frameworks. This reflects a culture of improvisation and bottom-up innovation shaped by Israel's unique security challenges, with the belief that "necessity is the mother of invention," although there is a growing openness toward integrating theoretical perspectives. **The eighth chapter** highlights the contrarian thinking, moral courage, and deep sense of individual accountability and national mission embraced by Israeli intelligence officers, who serve as essential guardians of Israeli society and are driven by a strong sense of responsibility and a desire to make an impact. The book concludes with a summary of its main claims.

The main argument of Itai Shapira's *Israeli National Intelligence Culture: Problem-Solving,*

Exceptionalism, and Pragmatism is that Israel's intelligence practices are deeply shaped by a distinct national intelligence culture. This culture is characterized by a focus on problem-solving, a pragmatic approach that prioritizes action over theory, and a belief in Israeli exceptionalism, which views the country's challenges as unique and requiring innovative solutions.

Specifically, the introduction suggests, inter alia, that a structural intelligence failure regarding a warning from a non-commissioned officer of Unit 8200, which did not reach the appropriate leadership, points to a systemic breakdown in how critical intelligence was handled.

The book explores the cultural foundations of the Israeli intelligence system up until the period before October 7, 2023. At the conclusion of each chapter, the author poses rhetorical questions that enhance the reader's understanding of the broader factors that may have contributed to that event, which is likely to remain a lasting trauma for the Israeli intelligence community for years to come, viewed through the lens of the key cultural aspects of that community. It serves as a crucial reference for critical discussions within the intelligence community and among those engaged with security matters in Israel. However, despite the added value of the rhetorical questions, there are tensions between the research conducted prior to October 7 and the trauma of that day, which appears to have shaped the final version of the text, resulting in contradictions. Specifically, the introduction suggests, inter alia, that a structural intelligence failure regarding a warning from a non-commissioned officer of Unit 8200, which did not reach the appropriate leadership, points to a systemic breakdown in how critical intelligence was handled. This failure was not merely a lapse in communication, but rather reflects a deeper issue: the suppression of dissenting voices within Israeli intelligence.⁴ Yet later in the

book, the author highlights Israeli intelligence culture's emphasis on individual initiative, moral courage, contrarian thinking, and the *chutzpah*⁵ inherent in Israeli society. This contradiction between an intelligence culture that ostensibly values critical thinking and an environment where warnings were dismissed or silenced deserves further exploration. Given that the book does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the October 7 failure, the section on "The October 2023 Israeli Intelligence Failure" could have been omitted to avoid complicating the narrative.

The main concern lies with the IDI. Once regarded as the "national estimator" in terms of its responsibility for security estimates, its status has diminished over the years, and its perceived effectiveness is now being questioned, both theoretically and practically.

The author suggests that the intelligence failure of October 7, 2023, could drive essential reforms in the Israeli intelligence system. Key areas for change include the agencies' competitive nature, their tendency to expand responsibilities rather than maintain a clear hierarchical structure, and a broader cultural inclination toward "extended duty," where roles surpass conventional boundaries. Additionally, potential reforms may focus on reducing competition between cultural sub-currents, balancing interpretivism, and overcoming Israel's reluctance to adopt theoretical frameworks and scientific methodologies in analyses, stemming from the perceived exceptionalism of its threats. Prior to October 2023, Israeli intelligence agencies were widely regarded by the public as successful, with a high and even heroic status in society. However, the aftermath of the Hamas attack has highlighted the need for a deeper examination of the intelligence apparatus, potentially leading to a new era of study into Israeli intelligence. Interestingly, while the Mossad

retains its prestigious reputation, especially after the successful Operation Grim Beeper⁶ in Lebanon, the main concern lies with the IDI. Once regarded as the "national estimator" in terms of its responsibility for security estimates, its status has diminished over the years, and its perceived effectiveness is now being questioned, both theoretically and practically. This shift in perception may lead to a critical reassessment of the roles and responsibilities within Israel's intelligence community, with the aim of addressing the gaps that were exposed on October 7. Still, the IDI must continue to simultaneously support ongoing campaigns and prepare for war, balance centralized operations with empowering field intelligence units while fostering innovation without compromising traditional core skills.

Shapira's book is highly advanced and assumes prior knowledge in intelligence studies to fully appreciate its depth and nuances. While this does not diminish its value, as it is primarily intended for experts, it may present a challenge for readers less familiar with the subject. Additionally, while the book offers valuable insights and examples from the interviewees that enhance understanding without being overly theoretical, it includes numerous names and ranks from various departments of the IDI, Mossad, and Shabak. This level of detail requires significant focus and can at times feel overwhelming or frustrating. Nevertheless, each chapter introduces new information, ensuring the content remains engaging and thought-provoking.

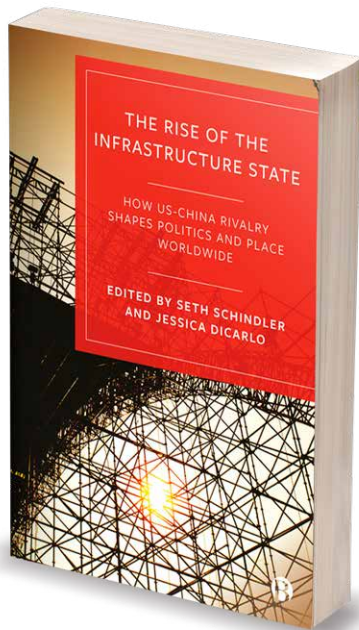
This book is expected to become an essential resource for academics, students, and practitioners seeking a deeper understanding of the complexities of Israel's intelligence community and its broader implications. Through a blend of expert perspectives and analysis, Shapira offers a unique look into the cultural, organizational, and strategic forces that shape Israeli intelligence. He highlights Israel's decentralized structure and its focus on pragmatism and innovation, offering

lessons that resonate with both scholars and practitioners. Through thoughtful comparisons with intelligence models like those of the U.S. and U.K., Shapira sheds light on Israel's strengths and challenges, while also contributing to the ongoing conversation about intelligence practices and policymaking. This work makes a meaningful contribution to the fields of intelligence and strategic studies, bridging the gap between theory and real-world application.

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Notes

- 1 Israel Defense Intelligence (IDI) is the English term for Aman (אגף המודיעין, *Agaf Ha-Modi'in*), the Military Intelligence Directorate of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).
- 2 Similarly, the Israeli Security Agency (ISA) is the English term for Shabak (שב"כ, *Sherut Bitachon Klali*), also known as Shin Bet.
- 3 https://www.iicc.org.il/?module=category&item_id=107
- 4 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/04/israel-female-field-observers-october-7-attacks-hamas-gaza/>
- 5 Defined on p.79 of the book as “a straight forward approach... practice inclination, and informality.”
- 6 <https://www.jfeed.com/news-israel/soxpuh>



Infrastructure and Israel's National Security

Itay Haiminis

Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies

The Rise of the Infrastructure State

By: Jessica DiCarlo, Seth Schindler

Publisher: University of Bristol

Year: 2022

Number of pages: 334

One of the most important discussions on Israel's national security that has occurred in recent years did not take place in IDF headquarters or at the Knesset; it took place at the *Globes* newspaper's Infrastructure Conference, which was held in Tel Aviv in March 2024 (Infrastructure Conference, 2024). Under the guise of civilian and technocratic topics such as "How Will Israel's Rail System Look in 2040" and "When Innovation Meets Public Transportation," economic leaders and representatives of government ministries discussed how Israel should act in order to achieve economic

prosperity and security. Despite the opposing interests and diverse approaches, as a rule, the speakers agreed that Israel is suffering from an ongoing infrastructure deficit and that governmental and private investment is required to generate national renewal in the coming years. Israel Railways' roadmap for the country's southern and northern periphery, as an example of an issue that apparently has no connection to national security, was revealed to be of crucial importance given its close connection with issues such as employment, housing, urban development, social gaps, and, of course, security.

The close relationship between infrastructure and national security is not obvious and the best source for a first dive into this topic is the book discussed here: *The Rise of the Infrastructure State: How US-China Rivalry Shapes Politics and Place Worldwide*. The book's editors, geographers Dr. Jessica DiCarlo and Prof. Seth Schindler, established the Second Cold War Observatory¹—a unique collective of researchers from around the world who study the Second Cold War, between China and the United States, and its impact on world order, places, and people.

An understanding of the struggle between the United States and China is crucial for any appreciation of the current moment in world history, because the relationship between them has, to a large extent, shaped the world order since the end of the (first) Cold War. The "Pax Americana" and the liberal international order of the last three decades would not have been possible without the cheap money, cheap labor, and cheap products that resulted from the integration of Asia, and particularly China, into the global economy (Ferguson & Schularick, 2007). In other words, if the United States was the beating heart of the world, it was Chinese blood that flowed through its arteries. While their mutual dependence endures, both countries have made great efforts to reduce it over the last decade. And along the way, they

are changing the world in almost every possible aspect of international relations.

Our lives today depend on a complex, global, cross-border system of communication networks, oil and gas pipelines, financial channels, supply chains, production lines, trade routes, server farms, and transportation infrastructure. Both China and the United States have a central role in this global system, which they see as critical for ensuring their political, economic, and security interests. Their efforts to maintain and expand their influence in these contested arenas are expressed in attempts to shape the rules of the game (for example, who can take part or how to act within them) or to decide what the structure of the networks, channels, chains, etc. will be (for example, certain supply chains will be established in or pass through the territory of certain countries, but not others) (Schindler et al., 2023).

For this reason, the struggle between the superpowers and its consequences for the world order have a direct and real impact on the foundations of Israel's national security. Several basic components of Israel's national security, its military superiority over its enemies, its technological capabilities, and its economic resilience are tied to the changing world order and, in particular, depend on open markets and the free trade of goods, knowledge, and raw materials, which have characterized the world in recent decades.

This groundbreaking book provides readers with a comprehensive, panoramic overview of the central and surprising role of infrastructure in the current geopolitical struggle between the United States and China. By focusing on infrastructure, the book succeeds in illustrating how the struggle between the superpowers has a direct, long-term impact on the character of many countries around the world and on the lives of millions. The book's readers are exposed to the fact that the geopolitical struggle is expressed not only in diplomatic talks or high-profile military conflicts, but also in the very tangible, day-to-day experience of many

people worldwide, resulting from the character of important projects such as transportation, communication, commercial, and energy infrastructure. These kinds of material projects have a major impact on people's lives with respect to employment, the environment, health, and the family, and in addition to the national implications, they also affect the prestige and the national power of the countries where they take place.

This groundbreaking book provides readers with a comprehensive, panoramic overview of the central and surprising role of infrastructure in the current geopolitical struggle between the United States and China.

The book contains more than twenty chapters on a variety of infrastructure projects (in the fields of nuclear energy, space, transportation, energy, commerce, and more) in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and South America. In moving away from exclusively looking at the geopolitical relationship between the United States and China and toward many countries in the Global South or the Third World, the book implicitly answers researchers Jean and John Comaroff's 2022 call for a "theory from the South" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). According to the Comaroffs, any understanding of the state of the world, must move beyond the Global North. In today's world, the countries of the Global South are ahead of the countries of the Global North; the most significant global processes are taking place in them and only later reaching the North. Trends and events that we are now experiencing in the Global North have already taken place many times in the Global South, in a way that allows thinkers and researchers from these countries to develop relevant theoretical and practical knowledge about them. For example, instead of confusion when faced with the recurring economic, social, or geopolitical crises we have been experiencing in recent years, it might be beneficial to look at

countries in Africa or Latin America, for example, where scholars have developed theories or political ideas that may also be relevant for Israel.

The book's main deficiency seems to be with respect to conceptual analysis. For example, surprisingly, the book does not discuss at length the question of what infrastructure is or how the concept's meaning has changed throughout history. One way to understand the concept is a "set of systems that enable a society's functioning" (Coyle, 2024). In other words, infrastructure is not just the complex engineering systems of pipelines or transportation routes, but also "social infrastructure," that is, physical infrastructure in the areas of education, health, or welfare, and even digital infrastructure such as data centers that are accessible to the public.

It is beyond the scope of this review to survey all of the case studies presented in the book. The case studies of Laos (chapter 12) and Nepal (chapter 13), which we will focus on, exemplify the new architecture of opportunities that the Second Cold War offers small and medium-sized countries like Israel. They are not the obvious choice because they are perceived as poor, weak, and isolated. But for exactly this reason, the change in their image, standing, and political and economic power should demonstrate the tremendous potential of leveraging the infrastructure struggle between the superpowers. Moreover, these case studies represent central components of a successful process of political change toward adopting a "modern infrastructure state" model that we can and should learn from. Laos and Nepal have exploited the struggle between the superpowers to launch and promote unprecedented physical infrastructure projects that would not have been possible beforehand or under different geopolitical circumstances. While the case studies present countries that have chosen to tie their fate to China's global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (sometimes called the New Silk Road), there are of course other case studies of countries that have joined

forces with the United States for similar needs and using similar means.

The Case Studies of Laos and Nepal

In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a high-profile visit to Laos, during which the countries signed a long series of agreements related to transportation, energy, agriculture, tourism, trade, banking, and industry. While the agreements strengthened Laos' dependence on China, more significantly, they were an important milestone in a decades-long process in which Laos succeeded in transforming its geography from a burden into an advantage. Projects such as railways, roads, and logistical warehouses aim to improve Laos' situation and provide its residents with greater employment opportunities. They have provided Laos with loans worth tens of billions of dollars for the development of infrastructure since the beginning of the previous decade. These projects, and especially the participation in various infrastructure projects of the Belt and Road Initiative, have also led to changes in the state's mechanisms. New governmental research, consulting, and management agencies have been established to achieve Laos' national development goals. New bodies have been established to improve cooperation between Laos and China, with an emphasis on optimizing shared decision-making processes. These bodies are in charge of formulating recommendations regarding what types of projects to establish and how to finance and implement them. In addition to changes in the government, projects in Laos within the Belt and Road Initiative affect a large variety of areas—from tax laws to the status of private property and the bureaucratic burden on private businesses.

Two years after his visit to Laos, Xi Jinping visited Nepal, for the first time in 23 years. During the visit, he reaffirmed China's commitment to building a regional railway, cross-border roads, economic corridors, dry ports, and even a university. As with Laos, large-scale national infrastructure projects were part of a strategy

of developing and achieving Nepal's national goals. After years of economic liberalization and reduced government involvement in the local economy, participation in infrastructure projects in the Belt and Road Initiative forced the Nepalese government to play a more active role, take the initiative, grow, and improve its capabilities. As with the case study of Laos, these projects and others in the Belt and Road Initiative aim to more closely connect Nepal with the regional economy and world markets in order to contribute to the local economy. In addition to the direct contribution to the country's economy, the Belt and Road Initiative has also had a positive impact on Nepal's geopolitical positioning, as can be seen, for example, in its impact on Nepal's relations with India. Chinese interest in Nepal and the economic opportunities that were available to Nepal as part of the Belt and Road Initiative gave Nepal new and greater leeway vis-à-vis India, after many years of dependence on the Indian economy. In this context, it is worth examining, for example, the agreement in which India agreed to invest in the establishment of a 70-km oil pipeline between India and Nepal, as well as investments in dry ports, a railway, and more.

In conclusion, the leaders of Laos and Nepal saw the infrastructure projects within their territories as key to long-term national development plans that will address the totality of the countries' needs and wants. The nature of the projects also entailed broader changes within Laos and Nepal as well as to their immediate geographical environment. Physical infrastructure projects that aimed to address specific national needs became engines for economic growth, technological modernization, regional development (urban, rural, and agricultural), and social advancement. Broad national change was not just a desirable byproduct of these projects; it was an expression of the local leadership's recognition that such projects will not achieve their aims if they are not accompanied by necessary reforms in a

variety of fields, including the operation and structure of the state's mechanisms.

The book allows us to reimagine ourselves as a modern infrastructure state.

From High-Tech Nation to Modern Infrastructure State

Does the book contain insights or lessons that are relevant to Israel's national security? Certainly! At the very least, the book allows us to reimagine ourselves as a modern infrastructure state. This would entail the State of Israel promoting national projects that shape the physical realm by creating and managing public infrastructure—from building bridges and public libraries to national research and development labs—in order to strengthen its integration in the world economy (including regionally) and to achieve ambitious national development goals in the socioeconomic, environmental, and security spheres. The extensive damage caused to communities in northern and southern Israel since the beginning of the war and the evacuation of their residents created an urgent need, but also an opportunity, to rebuild these areas and communities as part of broader national infrastructure change. In a modern infrastructure state, various types of infrastructure would serve and benefit the entire public—both individuals and communities. This is a model for national socioeconomic development that is different from the start-up nation model that has characterized Israel in recent decades. That model had many advantages, but it did not succeed in serving as a source of inclusive and sustainable national growth (Maggor, 2022, 2024). Moreover, in the coming years it could become untenable, given the Second Cold War and its harmful effect on global supply chains, particularly in technological spheres (Special Conference, 2023).

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Israeli recognition of the great potential inherent in infrastructure is expressed in recent Israeli governments' ambitious moves to make Israel part of the United States' global supply chains. This would be in the form of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was meant to pass through Israel.

Israeli governments' ambitious moves to make Israel part of the United States' global supply chains. This would be in the form of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was meant to pass through Israel. The ambitious initiative, which was intended to be a response and an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative, has encountered geopolitical difficulties in recent years due to the regional war in the Middle East. The fighting itself, as well as the significant changes in the balance of power in the region as well as in the identity of the actors and their interests, raise questions over its feasibility. Nevertheless, the actors involved have not yet publicly abandoned it, and in my estimation, it will be implemented eventually, perhaps after certain changes to the current plan. The initiative is planned as a transportation corridor (sea and land) that proceeds by sea from the coast of India through the Strait of Hormuz to Dubai, continues via Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Haifa, from there by sea to Piraeus in Greece, and from there by land to Northern Europe. The economic corridor initiative, if implemented, could have far-reaching consequences for Israel and the entire region. Israel would benefit not only from new transportation infrastructure that would pass through its territory but also from a variety of implications of being part of a super-national American-sponsored trade system—from strengthening its relations with the other countries participating in the initiative to possible direct economic dividends from tax income and from strengthening the ties between the Israeli and regional economies. The project

might also advance urban development in the area that the corridors pass through. It is also conceivable that after the establishment of the corridor, along with other American-sponsored infrastructure initiatives, that the American interest in maintaining a military presence and involvement in the region, which has proven vital to Israel's security, would increase.

The economic corridor initiative should be examined in relation to other sporadic externally financed infrastructure projects that have been or are planned to be established in Israel. In this context, we note the American company Nvidia's decision to build digital and communication infrastructure in Israel (development and data centers), the Chinese involvement in transportation initiatives such as Haifa's Bayport, the Carmel Tunnels, the energy companies investing in developing gas fields in Israel's territorial waters, and more. While each of these examples can be explained separately, it is better to understand them in context and to see them as milestones in the process of Israel's technological modernization, its economic development, and its regional and global political positioning. In other words, national infrastructure projects should be a conscious and institutionalized part of a new, overarching Israeli strategy as a modern infrastructure state.

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The text represents the opinion of the author alone and does not represent the position of the IDF or the position of the Israeli security establishment.

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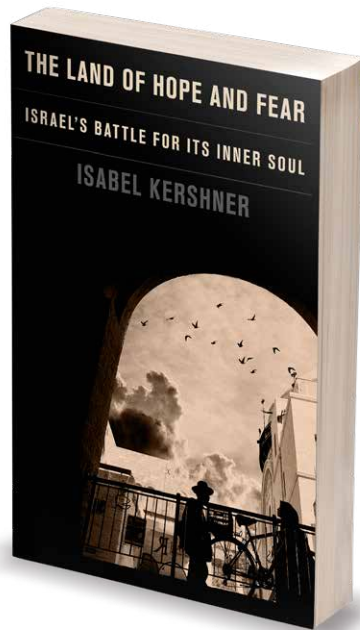
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Notes

- 1 Second Cold War <https://tinyurl.com/2p8naz4x>



Is Our Hope Lost? A Snapshot of Tribalism in Israeli Society

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The Land of Hope and Fear: Israel's Battle for its Inner Soul

By: Isabel Kershner

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Introduction

Over more than 75 years, the State of Israel has absorbed millions of immigrants, weathered economic crises, and thrived despite continuous struggles for its very existence. However, despite all the difficulties and hardships, Israel in 2025 finds itself in what may be the deepest and most significant crisis since its establishment.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power and the formation of his sixth government at the end of December 2022, led

Israel into a social and political crisis and a struggle over the country's character in the wake of Justice Minister Yariv Levin's launch of judicial reform. The social upheaval—including mass demonstrations and concerns for Israel's future as a democratic country—and the rifts within society, demonstrated the fragility of Israeli democracy. The social crisis caused by the judicial reform intensified following Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war, which has continued for more than 17 months.

To understand the tensions within Israeli society, we must examine the contradictory interpretations of the country's identity, focusing on the ongoing tension between its Jewish character and the democratic values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. In this context, the book by Isabel Kershner, a *New York Times* correspondent in Jerusalem, paints an intimate, multi-layered portrait of the State of Israel. Through journalistic coverage, intertwined with insights and descriptions of the various groups and "tribes," both Jewish and non-Jewish, that make up the country's diverse social fabric, she describes the processes that have contributed to the crisis in Israeli society.

The book was published in May 2023 amid the turbulent demonstrations that tore Israeli society apart and intensified the processes that Kershner has identified in Israeli society, which she writes about in depth. The book presents a snapshot of modern Israel—a country full of contradictions and tremendous successes, including the prosperous high-tech economy that brought Israel's GDP per capita up to a rate similar to that of Western Europe despite the internal tensions and political divisions. Kershner's book is an excellent work of journalism, and even though the author herself is clearly identified with the liberal Zionist camp, she avoids definitive statements about the future that awaits Israel. This is despite the concerning signs that she notes, including the rapid growth of the Haredi population, which does not identify with Zionism or the state, and the deepening internal rift between right and

left. However, through the portraits of tribes and parts of Israeli society that Kershner presents, she provides the international audience—which is perhaps less aware of the complexity and tribalism of Israeli society—with an excellent and comprehensive picture of Israel’s reality. For the Israeli audience, the book will be less of a revelation, but it provides a description of reality from the eyes of a woman with a comparative perspective like Kershner. The insights from the interviewees confirm common assumptions in Israeli society, though some have not been empirically examined.

Israel and its Tribes

Isabel Kershner was born in Manchester and studied at Oxford before moving to Israel in the 1990s. In this book, she combines the experience of a veteran journalist who is very familiar with Israeli politics with an external perspective that allows her to explain Israel’s complexity to an international audience, and it is clear that she succeeds. More than a few books have been written about the history of the State of Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the internal rifts and complexity of Israeli society. In the previous decade, many books were published about Israel, some of them more sympathetic (Ari Shavit), with others advocating increased Western pressure on Israel regarding concessions to the Palestinians (Nathan Thrall) and describing the deterioration of democratic norms (Greg Carlstrom). Kershner takes a nonjudgmental stance, although she expresses sympathy for the ethos of the values of Israel’s founding fathers, who defined Israel as a Jewish and democratic state while supporting practical and egalitarian approaches. Using her journalistic skills, Kershner describes and analyzes the various processes and streams in Israeli society that led to what she defines as Israel’s “national unraveling.”

Kershner’s primary prism is the one former President Reuven Rivlin outlined in his famous speech at the Knesset, in which he described Israel as being divided into four tribes: secular

Israelis, religious Zionists, Haredim, and Arabs. Within this tribal composition are many sub-groups, each with a unique identity and background. The book’s first few chapters analyze the primary tensions and arguments in Israel between David Ben-Gurion’s labor movement and Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin’s revisionist movement. The story begins in the arid desert in the cooperative village Ein Yahav, and the village itself serves as an allegory of the decline of the values of the socialist and egalitarian spirit that characterized the country’s founders, with Israel’s development into a fractured, modern, capitalist country.

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In contrast to the values of the labor movement stands the figure of Yoske Nahmias, a revisionist and supporter of Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin. Through him, Kershner describes the dominant rule of Mapai (the “Land of Israel Workers’ Party”) during the State of Israel’s early years, including the difficulties that Nahmias encountered in finding work as a former member of the Irgun. But despite his criticism of Mapai’s political control, Nahmias expresses a nostalgia similar to that of Ein Yahav residents when he describes how Israeli politics has deteriorated and how the values that defined the Revisionist camp and the Likud party in the past—a combination of liberal nationalism and a commitment to democratic values and the rule of law—have eroded.

Kershner moves from nostalgia to the present and focuses on the issue of the ethnic divide between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. She uses the conflict at Kibbutz Nir David over the use of the Asi Stream, during which residents of Beit She’an sought access to the pastoral stream that flows through the kibbutz, as a lens through which she

describes the ongoing tension in Israeli politics. The Likud's rise to power under Menachem Begin in 1977 was largely made possible through the widespread support of Mizrahim in the periphery in places like Beit She'an, which is adjacent to Nir David. The dispute surrounding access to the Asi Stream reopened the argument about the privileges of the kibbutzim and the Ashkenazi elite over the Mizrahi residents of the periphery, who were excluded and disadvantaged for years under the rule of Mapai. Kershner connects the historical injustice with the political tension in the present and shows how the support of Mizrahim in the periphery for Begin and the Likud in the 1970s continues to shape the party's political base to this day.

The book includes a warning about demographic processes, especially when discussing the status of the IDF as the people's army given Israel's changing demography. Kershner notes that today, almost 50% of first-grade students in Israel are Arab or Haredi, thus sowing the seeds for a significant demographic change that may harm national security.

She analyzes other groups in Israeli society, including the immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who came en masse at the beginning of the 1990s and had difficulty integrating into Israeli society. She also relates to the immigration of Jews from Ethiopia and to the fact that racism and social gaps, as well as incidents of police violence, have led to an awakening and activism by young Ethiopian-Israelis, which were expressed in demonstrations against the state, among other things.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not at the core of the book. However, Kershner also dedicates chapters to Israeli Arabs and, in particular, to the city of Lod, which was a focal point of violent incidents during Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021. The author notes the complexity for Israeli Arabs—their inability or choice not to use their political

power. On the other hand, in addition to the tensions, there are positive trends among the Arab population, including the expansion of higher education and increasing integration in the labor market. There is also a chapter dedicated to the bourgeois settlers from the community of Esh Kodesh, who produce quality wine in the mountains of Samaria but are conspicuously disconnected from the reality of their Palestinian neighbors. The settlers from Esh Kodesh illustrate the evolution of the settlement enterprise, which combines biblical aspirations with a twenty-first-century lifestyle.

A Look to the Future

The book includes a warning about demographic processes, especially when discussing the status of the IDF as the people's army given Israel's changing demography. Kershner notes that today, almost 50% of first-grade students in Israel are Arab or Haredi, thus sowing the seeds for a significant demographic change that may harm national security. Kershner laments the erosion of the "cherished, sacrosanct ideal of the people's army" and gives the example of pop singer Noa Kirel, who was drafted into the IDF and immediately flew to Thailand for a vacation. Kershner describes the substantial gaps between those serving in the IDF, who see Israel as a Zionist country, and the Haredim, who maintain a separate way of life that does not include identification with the Israeli ethos, a connection to the twenty-first century, or skills for competing in Israel's labor market.

Despite the tension that exists and is deepening in Israeli society, Kershner chooses to end her book on an optimistic note. She claims that despite all the difficulties and problems, Israel continues to succeed in raising standards, taking initiative, and fostering innovation. At the end of the book, she states that the characters in the story of Israel are not going anywhere because "the Israelis – Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, immigrants and veterans, liberals and zealots—are all by now intrinsic elements of the landscape." And

perhaps this understanding offers hope that this divided society will return to the ideals of the founding generation of this complex country, to guide it away from national disintegration toward a better and less toxic future.

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Call for Papers for *Strategic Assessment*

The editorial board of the INSS journal *Strategic Assessment* invites authors to submit articles to be published in the journal's updated format. Proposals for special themed issues are also welcome.

Strategic Assessment, a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on national security, cyber, and intelligence, was launched in 1998 and is published in Hebrew and English by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University. *Strategic Assessment*, accredited by the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education in Israel, serves as a platform for original research on a spectrum of issues relating to the discipline of national security, cyber, and intelligence. The purpose of the journal is to spark and enhance an informed, constructive debate of fundamental questions in national security studies, using an approach that integrates a theoretical dimension with policy-oriented research. Articles on topics relating to Israel, the Middle East, the international arena, and global trends are published with the goal of enriching and challenging the national security knowledge base.

The current era has seen many changes in fundamental conventions relating to national security and how it is perceived at various levels. As national security research evolves, it seeks to adjust to new paradigms and to innovations in the facets involved, be they technological, political, cultural, military, or socio-economic. Moreover, the challenge of fully grasping reality has become even more acute with the regular emergence of competing narratives, and this is precisely why factual and data-based research studies are essential to revised and relevant assessments.

The editorial board encourages researchers to submit articles that have not been previously published that propose an original and innovative thesis on national security with a broad disciplinary approach rooted in international relations, political science, history, economics, law, communications, geography and environmental studies, Israel studies, Middle East and Islamic studies, sociology and anthropology, strategy

and security studies, technology, cyber, conflict resolution, or additional disciplines.

In the spirit of the times, *Strategic Assessment* is shifting its center of gravity to digital presence and access. Articles approved for publication, following the review and editing process, will be published in an online version on the journal's website in the format of "online first," and subsequently included in the particular issues.

Strategic Assessment publishes articles in four categories:

Research Forum—academic articles of a theoretical and research nature on a wide range of topics related to national security, of up to 8000 words in Hebrew or 10,000 words in English, including source material (with APA-style documentation). Articles should be researched-based and include a theoretical perspective, and address a range of subjects related to national security. All articles are submitted for double blind peer review. Submissions must include an abstract of 100-120 words; keywords (no more than ten); and a short author biography.

Professional Forum—panel discussions on a particular topic, or in-depth interview, of 2000-3000 words (up to 3500 words in English) including source material (APA-style). Submissions must include a short author biography.

Academic Survey—a survey of 1800-3000 words (up to 4000 words in English) including references and recommended reading (APA-style) of the latest professional literature on a specific topic relating to national security. Submissions must include a short author biography.

Book Reviews—book reviews of 800-1500 words (up to 2000 words in English) including source material (APA-style) on a wide range of books relating to national security. Submissions must include a short author biography.

Articles should be submitted electronically to editors-sa@inss.org.il and indicate the category of the attached article. You may also use this e-mail address for questions or additional information about the journal.

Raz Zimmt and Gallia Lindenstrauss
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