

# COMMENTARY

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## **Israel's Unprecedented Geopolitical Strength**

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**I**t may seem counterintuitive, or even downright strange, but Israel's geopolitical position is probably stronger now than at any time in the country's history. This is likely to continue at least in the short-to-medium term, but looming long-term challenges should give some pause to Israel's current leaders. They should recall that even way back in the 1960s, then-Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol sardonically referred to Israel as "Shimshon der nebekhdiker," or "poor little Samson."

It is therefore rich with irony that it is undisputed among Republican presidential candidates that President Barack Obama has "thrown Israel under the bus," while Hillary Clinton promises "no daylight" between the United States and Israel, instead of advocating policies that would strongly encourage Israel to ameliorate the Palestinians' untenable situation. Bernie Sanders, who once spent a year on a kibbutz as a young man, seems to prefer to avoid the issue entirely, which is perhaps a different kind of irony.

It is worth reviewing Israel's markedly changed security situation since its establishment in 1948. At that time Israel considered itself in genuine existential danger from the Arab world, and with good reason. This danger lessened with its victory in the 1967 Six Day War, and the Jewish state's safety from an Arab attack was largely sealed with its 1979 treaty with Egypt. However, a sense of insecurity still pervaded Israel once it became clear that peace with Egypt was not going to be followed by normalization with the rest of the region.

The Oslo process of the 1990s led to formal agreements with only two Arab governments, Jordan and Palestine — the latter not being a state — but all recognized that the regional atmosphere had changed markedly. Israel developed informal, often semi-secret relations with Arab countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and the Persian Gulf sheikdoms. The Israeli right warned

that Arabs had not given up their dream of destroying Israel, but that went against the zeitgeist, and did not resonate with ordinary Israelis. Then came the breakdown of the Oslo Accords, the Second Intifada, and a general cooling of relations with the Arab world. This included the Durban “Zionism is Racism” reprise, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, and, since 2006, three asymmetrical wars with Hamas and one with Hezbollah. There was more pressure on Israel to accede to a Palestinian state, and a general perception that Israel was heading toward the pariah status it had experienced in the 1970s and 1980s.

Israel has responded by electing ever more right-wing governments, issuing almost daily accusations of anti-Semitism, increasing friction with the United States, and all but repudiating the two-state solution. The recent wave of stabbings and car-ramming attacks that have caused the deaths of at least 30 Israelis and 150 Palestinians are — if not dangerous to the state — unnerving to say the least.

So how can one claim Israel’s position is stronger than ever?

Israelis are stuck in the insecure mindsets of 1948 and 1967, despite the region’s dramatic changes. Though the word “Israel” still elicits anger from most Arabs, such passion no longer poses a threat to Israel’s existence for the following reasons:

— Israel is now an integral part of the regional status quo; Arab governments want stability more than anything else, as does Israel. This has been true at least since the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. The only issue keeping most Arab governments from normal diplomatic relations with Israel is the absolute need to have a Palestinian state to show their people that they haven’t capitulated completely. No Arab state at this point would benefit from Israel’s disappearance.

— The most important Sunni countries in the region actually see Israel as a de facto ally. These include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the rich Gulf sheikdoms, and, of course, Jordan. This is largely because of a shared fear of Iran, but also an equally pervasive fear of state collapse and of militant Islamic movements like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group. The failed states of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen serve as daily warning of the dangers of instability.

— It is more than likely that Iran, if it ever truly was an existential threat, will recede as one in the coming years. There is a desperate fight going on within the Iranian elite, pitting reform-minded President Hassan Rouhani and his supporters against the clerical lobby and the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is generally conservative but occasionally empowers Rouhani, is almost 80 and reportedly ailing. So far, Iran has completely fulfilled the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal, though it has pushed back in other directions. However, it is palpably eager to rejoin the world economy and rebuild its own, which would give it a lot to lose if it is found in violation of the nuclear pact. However, even if Iran does switch directions, the risk to Israel is less than it was in years past. The world is

awake to that danger, and Israel's interests and those of the rest of the world are more aligned. Israel, in addition to being under the American nuclear umbrella, is widely believed to possess its own nuclear weapons arsenal, and the Iranian leadership has never shown any appetite for bringing certain destruction on itself.

— Widespread regional turmoil makes Israel a secondary issue. For example, Hezbollah may have 100,000 missiles pointed at Israel, but it has its hands full with the Syrian civil war. Even without that, there is a balance of terror of Cold War proportions between Hezbollah and Israel, and Hezbollah does not want to see Lebanon become like Gaza.

— Israel's economic prowess is unprecedented. The discovery of massive natural gas fields off its coast, combined with its role as a high-tech powerhouse, means Israel now has deep economic pockets. Even if economic warfare were levied against it, the country would likely be able to withstand it.

It is solely Israel's insistence on holding onto the territories it occupied in 1967 that prevents most of these elements from being publicly acknowledged and undeniable. Israel, because of its own experiences and those of the Jewish people, is stuck in a mindset that was forged in the 1940s, but that is out of kilter with the current era. Of course, it is still in a dangerous neighbourhood, but most of its neighbours are now anxious to be friends. How long will Israel refuse to take notice of that and accept its rightful place in the region?

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