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Israel: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief

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Israel: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief

Israel has forged close bilateral cooperation with the United States in many areas. A 10-year bilateral military aid memorandum of understanding—signed in 2016—commits the United States to provide Israel \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing and to spend \$500 million annually on joint missile defense programs from FY2019 to FY2028, subject to congressional appropriations. Some Members of Congress have increased their scrutiny over Israel's use of U.S. security assistance, contributing to debate on the subject. This report also discusses the following matters:

Current government and coalition uncertainty. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of the Yamina party and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid party lead a power-sharing government featuring a group of disparate parties from across the political spectrum (including an Arab-led party) that replaced the government of the long-serving Benjamin Netanyahu in June 2021. To date, the government has focused on pragmatic management of Israel's security and economy rather than comprehensive policies such as those related to the Palestinians. Even so, disagreements have occurred between various elements of the coalition. As of June 2022, two members of Yamina have resigned from the coalition. With the coalition's support down to 59 out of 120 Knesset (parliament) members, it is struggling to survive and function. Under the power-sharing agreement, Lapid could become a caretaker prime minister if the Knesset votes to hold new elections, while Netanyahu—who leads the opposition and is on trial for allegations of criminal corruption—could return to power under some scenarios.

Israeli-Palestinian issues. In hopes of preserving the viability of a negotiated two-state solution among Israelis and Palestinians, Biden Administration officials have sought to help manage tensions, bolster Israel's defensive capabilities, and strengthen U.S.-Palestinian ties that frayed during the Trump Administration. Administration officials regularly speak out against steps taken by Israelis or Palestinians that could risk sparking violence and undermining the vision of two states—including settlement expansion and settler violence, demolitions, evictions, incitement to violence, and payments for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism. Violence in 2022 has triggered heightened counterterrorism measures and some controversy, including in relation to the killing of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. With the Gaza Strip still under the control of the Sunni Islamist militant group Hamas (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization), the United States and other international actors face significant challenges in seeking to help with reconstruction without bolstering the group.

The Abraham Accords and Israeli normalization with Muslim-majority states. The Biden Administration has followed agreements reached during the Trump Administration that normalized or improved relations between Israel and four Arab or Muslim-majority states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Biden Administration officials have said that any further U.S. efforts to assist Israeli normalization with Muslim-majority countries would seek to preserve the viability of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian leaders have denounced normalization as an abandonment of the Palestinian national cause, given Arab states' previous insistence that Israel address Palestinian negotiating demands as a precondition for improved ties.

Ongoing efforts to deepen security and economic ties between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco could drive broader regional cooperation—including on air and missile defense—that inclines Saudi Arabia and other Muslim-majority countries toward future normalization with Israel. Congress has passed and proposed legislation encouraging more normalization and greater regional security cooperation involving Israel.

Countering Iran in the region. Israeli officials seek to counter Iranian regional influence and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Israel supported President Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the 2015 international agreement that constrained Iran's nuclear activities. Prime Minister Bennett has made statements opposing the Biden Administration reentering or revising the agreement. Observers have speculated about future Israeli covert or military actions to influence nuclear diplomacy and Iran's program. Israel also has reportedly conducted a number of military operations against Iran and its allies in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq due to its concerns about Iran's presence in these areas and Lebanese Hezbollah's missile arsenal.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Israel has sought to provide political support for Ukraine and humanitarian relief for Ukrainians without alienating Russia. To date, Israel has not provided lethal assistance to Ukraine, but has provided protective equipment to Ukrainian rescue forces and civilian groups. Since 2015, Russia's air defense capabilities in Syria have compelled Israel to deconflict its airstrikes there with Russia.

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Overview: Major Issues for U.S.-Israel Relations

Israel (see **Figure 1** for a map and basic facts) has forged close bilateral cooperation with the United States in many areas. For more background, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti; and CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

U.S.-Israel security cooperation—a critical part of the bilateral relationship—is multifaceted. U.S. law requires the executive branch to take certain actions to preserve Israel’s “qualitative military edge,” or QME, and expedites aid and arms sales to Israel in various ways. A 10-year bilateral military aid memorandum of understanding (MOU)—signed in 2016—commits the United States to provide Israel \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and to spend \$500 million annually on joint missile defense programs from FY2019 to FY2028, subject to congressional appropriations. The MOU anticipates possible supplemental aid in emergency situations such as conflict. In March 2022, Congress appropriated \$1 billion in supplemental funding through FY2024 for the Iron Dome anti-rocket system as a response to the system’s heavy use during a May 2021 conflict between Israel and Gaza Strip-based groups such as Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) (both of which are U.S.-designated terrorist organizations). A few lawmakers seek oversight measures and legislation to distinguish certain Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza from general U.S. support for Israeli security.¹

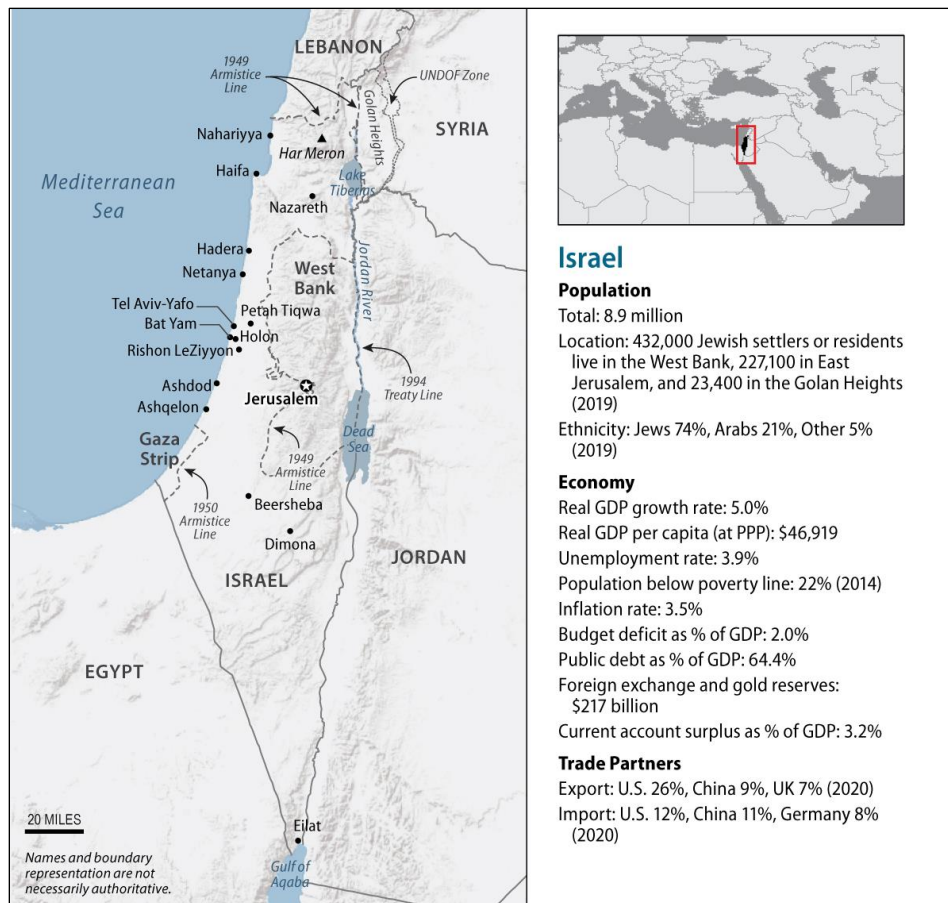
The Trump Administration made U.S. policy changes affecting bilateral relations when it recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in 2017 and moved the location of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018. These actions could affect future outcomes regarding Jerusalem’s status—given Palestinian claims to East Jerusalem as their future national capital—though the Trump Administration did not take a position on the boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in the city. The Biden Administration has said that the embassy will remain in Jerusalem.²

Additional issues to be discussed below with significant implications for U.S.-Israel relations include

- Israel’s current power-sharing government and its uncertain future.
- Israeli-Palestinian problems and their implications for U.S. policy, including violence and controversy in 2022, Gaza and its challenges, and human rights considerations.
- Developments regarding Israel’s normalization or improvement of relations with various Arab and Muslim-majority states since the Abraham Accords.
- Concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and regional influence, including with Lebanon-based Hezbollah.
- Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

¹ Rebecca Kheel, “Progressives ramp up scrutiny of US funding for Israel,” *The Hill*, May 23, 2021. One bill, the Two-State Solution Act (H.R. 5344), would expressly prohibit U.S. assistance (including defense articles or services) to further, aid, or support unilateral efforts to annex or exercise permanent control over any part of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) or Gaza.

² Niels Lesniewski, “White House confirms Biden will keep embassy in Jerusalem,” *Roll Call*, February 9, 2021.

Figure 1. Israel: Map and Basic Facts

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated using Department of State Boundaries (2017); Esri (2013); the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency GeoNames Database (2015); DeLorme (2014). Fact information from International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database; CIA, *The World Factbook*; and Economist Intelligence Unit. All numbers are estimates for 2022 unless otherwise specified.

Notes: According to the U.S. executive branch: (1) The West Bank is Israeli occupied with current status subject to the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement; permanent status to be determined through further negotiation. (2) The status of the Gaza Strip is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations. (3) The United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 without taking a position on the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty. (4) Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative. Additionally, the United States recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019; however, U.N. Security Council Resolution 497, adopted on December 17, 1981, held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel's military is occupied territory belonging to Syria. The current U.S. executive branch map of Israel is available at <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/israel/map>.

Domestic Issues

Current Government

A power-sharing government headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett took office in June 2021. This leadership change ended Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year tenure as prime minister and two years of political turmoil following Netanyahu's February 2019 criminal indictment on corruption

charges.³ Netanyahu and his Likud party now lead the Knesset's opposition, as was the case from 2006 to 2009.

While Bennett—a right-of-center figure who leads the Yamina party—currently heads the government, the centrist Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid played a leading role in arranging the coalition. If the government remains intact, Bennett is scheduled to serve as prime minister until August 27, 2023, at which point Lapid would become prime minister. The government draws its support from a disparate coalition of parties on the right (Yamina, New Hope, Yisrael Beiteinu), center (Yesh Atid and Kahol Lavan), and left (Labor, Meretz) of the political spectrum, as well as from the Arab-led, Islamist United Arab List (UAL or Ra'am) (see **Table 1**).⁴ UAL is the first independent Arab party to join an Israeli government.⁵ Women make up approximately one-third of Israel's cabinet, with nine female ministers, more than in any previous government.⁶

Table 1. Israeli Power-Sharing Government: Key Positions

Position	Name	Party
Prime Minister	Naftali Bennett	Yamina
Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister	Yair Lapid	Yesh Atid
Defense Minister	Benny Gantz	Kahol Lavan
Finance Minister	Avigdor Lieberman	Yisrael Beiteinu
Justice Minister	Gideon Sa'ar	New Hope
Interior Minister	Ayelet Shaked	Yamina
Transportation Minister	Merav Michaeli	Labor
Public Security Minister	Omer Bar Lev	Labor
Health Minister	Nitzan Horowitz	Meretz

The Coalition's Uncertain Future

In April 2022, the power-sharing government weakened when coalition whip Idit Silman from Yamina resigned from the coalition. She expressed concerns that the government's actions had harmed Jewish identity in Israel, and voiced support for an alternative, right-of-center government. In June 2022, Nir Orbach from Yamina also left the coalition, pledging to work toward an alternative coalition without initially voting to trigger new elections.

With the coalition's support down to 59 out of 120 Knesset members, it faces difficulties in surviving and functioning. If the Netanyahu-led opposition can garner majority support in a Knesset vote, it can either form an alternative government or require new elections.⁷ The following considerations could be relevant:

³ Netanyahu also served an earlier 1996-1999 term as prime minister.

⁴ For a comprehensive list of Israeli parties in the Knesset, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁵ Aaron Boxerman, "History made as Arab Israeli Ra'am party joins Bennett-Lapid coalition," *Times of Israel*, June 3, 2021.

⁶ Mazal Mualem, "Israeli female ministers introduce reforms, shake up agenda," *Al-Monitor*, September 10, 2021.

⁷ David Makovsky, "Political Tempest in Israel: Can Bennett Right the Ship?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 11, 2022.

- To lead a new government, Netanyahu might need more coalition supporters to switch sides, because the six Knesset members of the Arab-led Joint List from the opposition are unlikely to support him.
- Under the power-sharing agreement, a Knesset vote for new elections could lead to Lapid taking over as caretaker prime minister until the formation of a permanent government.
- A Knesset failure to pass a 2023-2024 budget by March 2023 would automatically trigger new elections.
- Another figure (such as Defense Minister Benny Gantz) could conceivably try to form a new government with support from current coalition and opposition elements.

In June 2022, the Netanyahu-led opposition in the Knesset withheld its support for a bill to renew the application of certain aspects of civilian law to Israeli settlers in the West Bank, and the bill—which is also opposed by some members of the coalition—failed to pass. The renewal is normally a routine matter, but right-of-center members of the opposition refused to vote for it in hopes of bringing down the coalition. Some observers speculate that stalemate on the settler law or other triggers could lead Justice Minister Gideon Sa’ar (a former Likud member) to defect from the coalition and form a government with Netanyahu, or lead the Knesset to vote for new elections.⁸

Israeli-Palestinian Issues⁹

Overview

Biden Administration officials have said that they seek to preserve the viability of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while playing down near-term prospects for direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.¹⁰ In doing so, they seek to help manage tensions, bolster Israel’s defensive capabilities, and strengthen U.S.-Palestinian ties that frayed during the Trump Administration. These officials regularly speak out against steps taken by Israelis or Palestinians that could risk sparking violence and undermining the vision of two states—including settlement expansion and settler violence, demolitions, evictions, incitement to violence, and payments for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism.¹¹

Some Israeli settlement construction plans for East Jerusalem and the West Bank have advanced,¹² but Israel has reportedly delayed a few plans flagged as especially damaging to the two-state vision by the Biden Administration or some Members of Congress.¹³ In May 2022,

⁸ Rory Jones and Yardena Schwartz, “Israeli Coalition In Danger After Vote,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2022; Mazal Mualem, “Israel’s Lapid courts Arab parties with eye toward early elections,” *Al-Monitor*, June 9, 2022.

⁹ See also CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹⁰ White House, “Remarks by President Biden Before the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” September 21, 2021.

¹¹ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett After Their Meeting,” Jerusalem, March 27, 2022.

¹² Hagar Shezaf, “Israel Advances Thousands of Settlement Homes Despite Harsh U.S. Rebuke,” *haaretz.com*, October 27, 2021.

¹³ “Israel stops plan for contentious east Jerusalem settlement,” *Associated Press*, December 6, 2021; “Plans to move forward with E1 settlement construction reportedly on hold,” *Times of Israel*, January 6, 2022.

Israel advanced plans for nearly 4,500 additional housing units for West Bank settlements,¹⁴ drawing statements of strong opposition from the Administration.¹⁵

Biden Administration officials have renewed diplomatic ties with West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and resumed various forms of U.S. aid for Palestinians.¹⁶ Additionally, as part of FY2021 appropriations legislation, the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act of 2020 (MEPPA, Title VIII of P.L. 116-260) authorized the establishment of two funds to support development in the West Bank and Gaza, along with various types of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and cooperation.¹⁷ For allocation between the two MEPPA funds, Congress appropriated \$50 million for FY2021 and the same amount for FY2022, with additional \$50 million tranches authorized for FY2023, FY2024, and FY2025.

Reopening of U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem?

Biden Administration officials have said that they plan to reopen the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem that had previously functioned as an independent diplomatic mission in handling relations with the Palestinians, without specifying when the consulate might reopen.¹⁸ The Trump Administration merged the consulate into the U.S. Embassy in Israel in March 2019, with the consulate's functions taken over by a Palestinian Affairs Unit (PAU) within the embassy. Competing Israeli and Palestinian national narratives influence this issue, with both sides appealing to U.S. officials about its importance of Jerusalem and its holy sites to their domestic constituencies.¹⁹

A December 2021 media report claimed that controversy on the issue led the Biden Administration to effectively shelve plans to reopen the consulate. It also said that the PAU was communicating directly with State Department officials in Washington, rather than working through other embassy channels.²⁰ In June 2022, the PAU was re-branded as the Office of Palestinian Affairs (OPA), with the OPA operating under the auspices of the embassy while reporting directly to Washington.²¹ This type of direct communication was a core aspect of the previous consulate general's independent status. Nevertheless, PA President Abbas reportedly continues to press for the reopening of the consulate.²²

Israel has taken some steps to improve Palestinians' economic and living circumstances, including through loans and work permits.²³ However, some critics charge that the measures mirror past Israeli efforts to manage the conflict's effects unilaterally rather than address its causes through negotiation with Palestinians.²⁴

¹⁴ Hagar Shezaf, "Israel Advances over 4,000 West Bank Housing Units for Jews," *haaretz.com*, May 12, 2022.

¹⁵ State Department Press Briefing, May 6, 2022.

¹⁶ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹⁷ For information on the Partnership for Peace Fund (PPF), see <https://www.usaid.gov/west-bank-and-gaza/meppa>. For information on the Joint Investment for Peace Initiative (JIPI), see <https://www.dfc.gov/media/press-releases/dfc-announces-joint-investment-peace-initiative-promote-middle-east-peace>. According to USAID FY2022 Congressional Notification #43, January 20, 2022, the Administration plans to allocate \$46.5 million of FY2021 funding for MEPPA toward the PPF, and \$3.5 million toward the JIPI.

¹⁸ State Department Press Briefing, November 3, 2021.

¹⁹ Barak Ravid, "U.S. and Israel to form team to solve consulate dispute," *Axios*, October 20, 2021; Jack Khoury and Jonathan Lis, "Palestinian Officials Say U.S. Seeks to Reopen Consulate Serving East Jerusalem After Israel Approves Budget," *haaretz.com*, October 3, 2021.

²⁰ Jacob Magid, "US holding off on reopening Jerusalem consulate amid strong pushback from Israel," *Times of Israel*, December 15, 2021.

²¹ Barak Ravid, "State Department separates Palestinian office from U.S. Embassy to Israel," *Axios*, June 9, 2022.

²² Barak Ravid, "Scoop: U.S. sending senior diplomat to Ramallah to reassure Palestinians," *Axios*, June 8, 2022.

²³ Thomas Grove and Fatima AbdulKarim, "Israel Offers Economic Help to Palestinians in Bid to Stem Influence of Hamas," *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2022; Aaron Boxerman, "Israel set to raise work permit quotas for Gazans to 20,000," *Times of Israel*, March 26, 2022.

²⁴ Neri Zilber, "Israel's new plan is to 'shrink,' not solve, the Palestinian conflict," *CNN*, September 16, 2021.

Some international bodies have subjected alleged Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians to further legal and political scrutiny. In March 2021, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor began an investigation into possible crimes in the West Bank and Gaza.²⁵ Members of Congress have taken varying positions on human rights-related concerns.

Violence and Controversy in 2022

A number of complicated factors may contribute to heightened tensions and episodic violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Israel. With prospects dim for diplomatic resolution of final-status issues like borders, refugees, and Jerusalem's status, militants and activists on both sides may seek to shape outcomes or express protest. Arab states' greater willingness—despite Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic stalemate—to cooperate openly with Israel could feed increased tensions (see “The Abraham Accords” below).

Since March 2022, a wave of Israeli-Palestinian violence has resulted to date in the deaths of 19 Israelis or foreigners in Israel and more than 40 Palestinians,²⁶ amid the following:

- Protests and violent altercations around Jerusalem holy sites, including during religious holidays and other sensitive times commemorating historical events.²⁷
- Heightened Israeli and PA security measures to counter alleged Palestinian lawlessness and militancy in West Bank cities such as Jenin.²⁸

In May 2022, prominent *Al Jazeera* journalist Shireen Abu Akleh (a Palestinian Christian from East Jerusalem who was a U.S. citizen) was killed by a gunshot in an area of Jenin where Israeli security forces were trading fire with Palestinians. Her death triggered a major international outcry, as did images of Israeli police disrupting her funeral in East Jerusalem. In condemning Abu Akleh's killing and an injury suffered by one of her colleagues, the State Department spokesperson called for an immediate and thorough investigation and full accountability, and said that Israel has “the wherewithal and the capabilities to conduct a thorough, comprehensive investigation.”²⁹ Some evidence suggests that the shot may have come from Israeli forces,³⁰ with the PA claiming that its investigation proves Israeli forces deliberately targeted Abu Akleh, but Israel denying any such intent.³¹ It is unclear whether and how Israel, the PA, or other parties might further investigate the matter, and whether U.S. authorities could be involved.³² Fifty-seven Members of Congress sent a letter to the State Department and FBI requesting that they investigate.³³ In April 2022, some advocacy groups and lawyers had filed a complaint with the ICC alleging that Israel has systematically targeted Palestinian journalists for years.³⁴

²⁵ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

²⁶ David S. Cloud and Anas Baba, “Israeli Work Permits Ease Gaza Tensions,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2022.

²⁷ CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

²⁸ Ahmad Melhem, “Israeli forces find tough resistance in Jenin camp,” *Al-Monitor*, May 25, 2022.

²⁹ State Department Press Briefing, May 11, 2022.

³⁰ Josef Federman, “Bellingcat probe suggests Israeli fire most likely killed journalist; but not 100%,” May 16, 2022.

³¹ “Palestinian officials: Israel killed Al Jazeera reporter,” *Associated Press*, May 26, 2022.

³² Joseph Krauss, “US has not been asked to help in probe of reporter's killing,” *Associated Press*, May 25, 2022; Lazar Berman, “PA refers Abu Akleh death to International Criminal Court prosecutors” *Times of Israel*, May 23, 2022.

³³ Text of letter available at <https://carson.house.gov/sites/carson.house.gov/files/Carson%20Shireen%20Abu%20Abkleh%20signed.pdf>.

³⁴ International Federation of Journalists, “Palestine: ICC case filed over systematic targeting of Palestinian journalists,” April 26, 2022.

Gaza and Its Challenges

The Gaza Strip—controlled by Hamas, but significantly affected by general Israeli and Egyptian access and import/export restrictions—faces difficult and complicated political, economic, and humanitarian conditions.³⁵ Palestinian militants in Gaza clash at times with Israel's military as it patrols Gaza's frontiers with Israel, with militant actions and Israeli responses sometimes endangering civilians in both places. These incidents occasionally escalate toward larger conflict, as in May 2021. Hamas and Israel reportedly work through Egypt and Qatar to help manage the flow of necessary resources into Gaza and prevent or manage conflict escalation. Since 2018, Egypt and Hamas (perhaps with implied Israeli approval) have permitted some commercial trade via the informal Salah al Din crossing that bypasses the formal PA controls and taxes at other Gaza crossings.³⁶

With Gaza under Hamas control, the obstacles to internationally supported recovery from the May 2021 conflict remain largely the same as after previous Israel-Gaza conflicts in 2008-2009, 2012, and 2014.³⁷ Because of the PA's inability to control security in Gaza, it has been unwilling to manage donor pledges toward reconstruction, leading to concerns about Hamas diverting international assistance for its own purposes.³⁸ Before the 2021 conflict, Qatar had provided cash assistance for Gaza, but due to Israeli concerns about the potential for its diversion, Qatar began an arrangement in September 2021 to provide money transfers to needy families through the United Nations.³⁹ In November 2021, Qatar and Egypt agreed on a new mechanism—with Israel's tacit approval—to restart assistance toward Gaza civil servants' salaries that had been on hold since the May 2021 outbreak of conflict.⁴⁰

The Abraham Accords

In late 2020 and early 2021, Israel reached agreements to normalize or improve its relations with four members of the Arab League: the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The Trump Administration facilitated each of these agreements, known as the Abraham Accords, and (as mentioned above) provided U.S. security, diplomatic, or economic incentives for most of the countries in question.⁴¹ In 2021, Israel opened embassies in the UAE and Bahrain, and both countries reciprocated. Israel and Morocco also reopened the liaison offices that each country had operated in the other from the mid-1990s to 2000. Saudi Arabia reportedly supported the UAE and Bahrain in their decisions to join the Abraham Accords, even allowing the use of Saudi airspace for direct commercial airline flights between those countries and Israel.⁴²

Trade, tourism, and investment ties have generally deepened since the signing of the Accords—including a May 2022 Israel-UAE free-trade agreement (pending Israeli ratification) and a major Israel-UAE-Jordan initiative focused on desalinated water and solar energy.⁴³ One exception is

³⁵ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

³⁶ Ahmad Abu Amer, "Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas provides boost for Gaza economy," *Al-Monitor*, November 23, 2021; Neri Zilber, "New Gaza Crossing Raises Questions About Blockade Policies," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 23, 2019.

³⁷ David Makovsky, "Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 25, 2021.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Aaron Boxerman, "UN to begin dispensing Qatari cash to needy Gazan families Monday under new deal," *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021.

⁴⁰ Yaniv Kubovich, "Egypt, Qatar Reach Breakthrough on Hamas Civil Servants Salaries," *haaretz.com*, November 29, 2021; Abu Amer, "Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas."

⁴¹ These incentives included possible U.S. arms sales to the UAE and Morocco, possible U.S. and international economic assistance or investment financing for Morocco and Sudan, and U.S. recognition of Morocco's claim of sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Some reports suggest that the Trump Administration linked Sudan's removal from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list to its agreement to recognize Israel.

⁴² Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Jake Sullivan discussed Saudi-Israel normalization with MBS," *Axios*, October 20, 2021.

⁴³ "Israel-UAE economic relations grow further with free trade agreement," *Al-Monitor*, May 31, 2022; "Israel, Jordan sign huge UAE-brokered deal to swap solar energy and water," *Times of Israel*, November 22, 2021.

that implementing Israel-Sudan normalization appears to be on hold following the Sudanese military's seizure of power in October 2021.⁴⁴ As a sign of mutual high-level commitment to the Accords, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid and the foreign ministers of the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt at a March 2022 summit in Israel's southern Negev desert.

U.S. and Israeli officials seek to expand the Abraham Accords to include other Arab and Muslim-majority countries. Commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Israel-UAE-Bahrain agreements in October 2021, Secretary Blinken said that "we're committed to continue building on the efforts of the last administration to expand the circle of countries with normalized relations with Israel in the years ahead."⁴⁵ However, the Biden Administration appetite for offering major U.S. policy inducements to countries in connection with normalization efforts remains unclear.⁴⁶ The Biden Administration also has sought to avoid portraying Israeli normalization with Arab and Muslim-majority states as a substitute for efforts toward a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴⁷ Palestinian leaders denounced the initial announcement of UAE normalization with Israel as an abandonment of the Palestinian national cause, given Arab League states' previous insistence that Israel address Palestinian negotiating demands as a precondition for improved ties.⁴⁸

Prospects for Saudi normalization. As Israel has drawn closer to some Arab states, the likelihood of a future normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia may be increasing. Given Saudi Arabia's importance as an economic and military power in the region, the kingdom's history of firm opposition to such normalization, and its status as the custodian of Islam's most holy and foundational sites, such a development could boost any precedent that the Abraham Accords may set for other Muslim-majority countries considering cooperation with Israel.⁴⁹ In June 2022, Secretary Blinken said that Saudi Arabia is a "critical partner" of the United States in dealing with regional challenges from extremism and Iran and in "continuing the process of building relationships between Israel and its neighbors both near and further away through the continuation, the expansion of the Abraham Accords."⁵⁰

While senior Saudi officials say that full Israel-Saudi normalization still remains contingent on progress with Palestinian issues,⁵¹ the two countries are reportedly engaging in serious talks in the meantime to build business ties and coordinate on regional security matters. Top Israeli and Saudi officials say that the countries could take certain incremental steps toward eventual normalization irrespective of the Palestinian question.⁵² Future steps could include the expansion of Israel's

⁴⁴ Testimony of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee, "Sudan's Imperiled Transition: U.S. Policy in the Wake of the October 25th Coup," Senate Foreign Relations Committee, hearing, February 1, 2022.

⁴⁵ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Joint Press Availability," October 13, 2021.

⁴⁶ Michael Koplow et al., "Biden has an opportunity to put his own stamp on Arab-Israeli relations," *The Hill*, October 14, 2021.

⁴⁷ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Joint Press Statements at the Conclusion of the Negev Summit," March 28, 2022.

⁴⁸ Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, "Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal," *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

⁴⁹ Dion Nissenbaum, "Saudis Expand Talks with Israel," *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2022.

⁵⁰ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the Foreign Affairs Magazine Centennial Celebration," June 1, 2022.

⁵¹ "Saudi foreign minister reiterates Kingdom's position on Israel," *Arab News*, May 24, 2022.

⁵² Nissenbaum, "Saudi Arabia Moves Toward Eventual Ties with Israel."

transit privileges through Saudi airspace, and Saudi Arabia's full assumption of control and security responsibility for the Red Sea islands Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt.⁵³ One Israeli journalist has argued that in talks regarding the two islands, U.S. officials are essentially encouraging Israel to agree to a weakening of security protocols from the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty in exchange for a future and still unclear hope of Israeli-Saudi normalization.⁵⁴

Security cooperation. In January 2021, President Trump determined that U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which commands U.S. military forces in most countries in the Middle East, would add Israel to its area of responsibility, partly to encourage military interoperability as a means of reinforcing closer ties between Israel and many Arab states.⁵⁵ Israel had previously been under the purview of U.S. European Command. CENTCOM formalized Israel's move in September 2021,⁵⁶ and in October an Israeli Defense Forces liaison was stationed at CENTCOM headquarters.⁵⁷ Since then, Israel has joined military exercises with the United States and the other Abraham Accords states, as well as other CENTCOM partners such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, and Pakistan.⁵⁸

Following a string of missile and drone attacks against the UAE in early 2022, apparently by Iran-allied forces in Yemen (known as the Houthis), the UAE government has reportedly expressed interest in closer security cooperation with Israel.⁵⁹ Earlier, both Morocco (November 2021) and Bahrain (February 2022) signed MOUs with Israel on security cooperation.⁶⁰ These MOUs appear to anticipate more intelligence sharing, joint exercises and training, and arms sales. In his February 8, 2022, confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, then-nominee as CENTCOM Commander (then-) Lieutenant General Michael Kurilla testified that Israel and other regional countries were cooperating on integrated air and missile defense and in other security areas. At the March 2022 Negev summit, Israeli leaders and their Arab counterparts reportedly discussed a range of possible cooperative measures, such as real-time intelligence sharing on inbound drone and missile threats and acquisition of Israeli air defense systems.⁶¹

Selected congressional actions. In January 2022, some Members of the Senate and House formed bipartisan caucuses to promote the Abraham Accords.⁶² In March, Congress enacted the

⁵³ Ibid.; Barak Ravid, "Scoop: U.S. negotiating deal among Saudis, Israelis and Egyptians," *Axios*, May 23, 2022.

⁵⁴ Amos Harel, "In UAE, Bennett Inches Closer to the Biggest Prize of All," *haaretz.com*, June 10, 2022.

⁵⁵ Jared Szuba, "Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift," *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2021.

⁵⁶ U.S. Central Command, "U.S. Central Command Statement on the Realignment of the State of Israel," September 1, 2021.

⁵⁷ Judah Ari Gross, "IDF liaison sets up shop in US CENTCOM offices in Florida, solidifying move," *The Times of Israel*, October 29, 2021.

⁵⁸ "UAE, Bahrain, Israel and U.S. forces in first joint naval drill," *Reuters*, November 11, 2021. Participant list for 2022 International Maritime Exercise available at <https://www.dvidshub.net/graphic/18822/imx-ce-22-participant-list>.

⁵⁹ Arie Egozi, "Amid attacks, UAE quietly asks Israel about defense systems: Sources," *Breaking Defense*, January 25, 2022.

⁶⁰ Ben Caspit, "Gantz says Israel, Morocco 'leap together' in historic agreement," *Al-Monitor*, November 26, 2021; Rina Bassist, "Israel signs security cooperation agreement with Bahrain," *Al-Monitor*, February 3, 2022. During the same visit in which Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz signed the MOU with Bahrain, he and Bahrain's defense minister made a public visit to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet base there to emphasize the level of collaboration among all parties involved.

⁶¹ "Israel reportedly working on air defense pact with regional allies," *Times of Israel*, March 29, 2022.

⁶² For more information, see <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Senate%20Abraham%20Accords%20Caucus%20Mission%20Statement.pdf>.

Israel Relations Normalization Act of 2022 (IRNA, Division Z of P.L. 117-103). Among other things, the IRNA requires the Secretary of State to submit an annual strategy for strengthening and expanding normalization agreements with Israel, and an annual report on the status of measures within Arab League states that legally or practically restrict or discourage normalization efforts with Israel or domestic support for such efforts.

In June 2022, several Members in the Senate and House introduced the Deterring Enemy Forces and Enabling National Defenses (DEFEND) Act of 2022. The bill would require the Secretary of Defense to submit a strategy and feasibility study on cooperation with Gulf Cooperation Council states, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt for an integrated air and missile defense capability to counter Iran-related threats.

Countering Iran

Israeli officials cite Iran as one of their primary concerns, largely because of (1) antipathy toward Israel expressed by Iran's revolutionary regime, (2) Iran's broad regional influence (including in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen), and (3) Iran's nuclear and missile programs and advanced conventional weapons capabilities. Iran-backed groups' demonstrated abilities since 2019 to penetrate the air defenses of countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates through coordinated drone and missile attacks have implications for Israeli security calculations.⁶³ Israeli observers who anticipate the possibility of a future war similar or greater in magnitude to Israel's 2006 war against Lebanese Hezbollah refer to the small-scale military skirmishes or covert actions since then involving Israel, Iran, or their allies as "the campaign between the wars."⁶⁴

Iranian Nuclear Issue and Regional Tensions

Israel has sought to influence U.S. decisions on the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). Then-Prime Minister Netanyahu strenuously opposed the JCPOA in 2015 when it was negotiated by the Obama Administration, and welcomed President Trump's May 2018 withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and accompanying reimposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran's core economic sectors. Since this time, Iran has increased its enrichment of uranium to levels that could significantly shorten the time it requires to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons.⁶⁵ Reported low-level Israel-Iran conflict has persisted in various settings—including cyberspace, international waters, and the territory of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq—with implications for regional tensions.⁶⁶

As the Biden Administration engages in international diplomacy and considers the possibility of reentering or revising the JCPOA, Israel is reportedly still seeking to influence diplomatic outcomes. Prior to the November 2021 resumption of international negotiations with Iran, Prime Minister Bennett stated that Israel would not be bound by a return to the JCPOA.⁶⁷ A January

⁶³ Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, "Drone Strike on Iranian Military Facility Is Deemed an Attack," *New York Times*, May 28, 2022; Anna Ahronheim, "How serious is the drone threat against Israel?" *jpost.com*, March 11, 2022.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Seth J. Frantzman, "Iran and Hezbollah analyze Israel's 'war between the wars,'" *jpost.com*, November 14, 2021.

⁶⁵ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Iran Nears an Atomic Milestone," *New York Times*, September 13, 2021.

⁶⁶ Ben Caspit, "IRGC colonel's assassination highlights Israel's shift in tactics against Iran," *Al-Monitor*, May 24, 2022; Dion Nissenbaum, "Israel Steps Up Campaign Against Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2022; Arie Egozi, "With missile attack and alleged espionage, Israel-Iran 'shadow war' slips into the open," *Breaking Defense*, March 16, 2022.

⁶⁷ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "PM Bennett's Remarks at the Security and Policy Conference of the Institute for

2022 report suggested that some leading Israeli security officials might prefer an international deal to no deal because an agreement could provide “increased certainty about the limitations on Iran’s nuclear program, and it would buy more time for Israel to prepare for escalation scenarios.”⁶⁸ Bennett has stated a preference for no deal,⁶⁹ but has said he does not intend to fight publicly with U.S. officials about it.⁷⁰

As international discussions around the JCPOA continued in March 2022, Bennett and Foreign Minister Lapid issued a joint statement arguing against reports that the United States might remove Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from its Foreign Terrorist Organizations list in exchange for a promise not to harm Americans.⁷¹ In an April 26, 2022, Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Secretary Blinken said that he could only envision the IRGC’s de-listing if Iran takes steps necessary to justify it.⁷² On May 4, 62 Senators voted in favor of a motion that any Iran nuclear deal must address Iran’s ballistic missile program, support for terrorism, and oil trade with China, and not lift sanctions on or de-list the IRGC.⁷³ Later in May, Bennett claimed that President Biden told him in April that he would not de-list the IRGC.⁷⁴

Various sources document reported Israeli covert or military operations targeting Iran’s nuclear program,⁷⁵ and some U.S. officials have reportedly differed with Israeli counterparts on the overall effectiveness of such operations.⁷⁶ In between his August 2021 White House meetings with Prime Minister Bennett, President Biden said that the United States will first use diplomacy to “ensure Iran never develops a nuclear weapon,” but if that fails, “we’re ready to turn to other options.”⁷⁷ In a September 2021 interview, Defense Minister Gantz suggested that he would be prepared to accept a U.S. return to the JCPOA, while also calling for a “viable, U.S.-led plan B” to pressure Iran in case negotiations are unsuccessful, and alluding to Israeli military contingency plans.⁷⁸

As of May 2022, one source reported that divisions persist among Israeli officials over which approach or combination of approaches—among options including international diplomacy, U.S.-led sanctions, and Israeli military and intelligence operations—may be likelier to prevent or slow Iranian nuclear advances.⁷⁹ Some sources allude to upgrades in Israeli military capabilities,⁸⁰ but

Policy and Strategy Conference, Reichman University,” November 23, 2021.

⁶⁸ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Israel’s military intel chief says Iran deal better than no deal,” *Axios*, January 5, 2022.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Lis, “Bennett Announces Laser-based Missile Defense System ‘Within a Year,’” *haaretz.com*, February 1, 2022.

⁷⁰ “Bennett says he won’t pick public fight with US over Iran nuclear deal,” *Times of Israel*, March 21, 2022.

⁷¹ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “Joint Announcement from PM Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid,” March 18, 2022.

⁷² Transcript available at <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-6518577?11>.

⁷³ H.R. 4521, Roll Call Vote #155: Motion Agreed to 62-33, R 46-1, D 15-31, I 1-1, May 4, 2022; *Congressional Record*, S.2321, May 4, 2022.

⁷⁴ Jacob Magid, “Bennett: Biden notified me last month of decision to keep Iran Guards on terror list,” *Times of Israel*, May 25, 2022.

⁷⁵ “Iran foils Israel-linked ‘sabotage’ plot at nuclear plant,” *Agence France Presse*, March 15, 2022.

⁷⁶ David E. Sanger et al., “Israeli Attacks Spur Upgrade of Iran Sites,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2021.

⁷⁷ White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Bennett of the State of Israel Before Expanded Bilateral Meeting,” August 27, 2021.

⁷⁸ Neri Zilber, “Israel Can Live with a New Iran Nuclear Deal, Defense Minister Says,” *foreignpolicy.com*, September 14, 2021.

⁷⁹ Ben Caspit, “Israeli leadership divided on Iran deal,” *Al-Monitor*, May 27, 2022.

⁸⁰ “Israel makes dramatic upgrades to military plans to attack Iran,” *jpost.com* (citing Walla!), June 8, 2022.

questions apparently remain about military readiness for a major operation against Iran's nuclear program.⁸¹

Hezbollah and Syria

Lebanese Hezbollah is Iran's closest and most powerful nonstate ally in the region. Hezbollah's forces and Israel's military have sporadically clashed near the Lebanese border for decades—with the antagonism at times contained in the border area, and at times escalating into broader conflict.⁸² Speculation persists about the potential for wider conflict and its implications, including from incursions into Israeli airspace by Hezbollah drones.⁸³

Israeli officials have sought to draw attention to Hezbollah's buildup of mostly Iran-supplied weapons—including reported upgrades to the range, precision, and power of its projectiles—and its alleged use of Lebanese civilian areas as strongholds.⁸⁴ In early 2022, Hezbollah's leadership and Israel's defense ministry both publicly cited Iran-backed efforts by Hezbollah to manufacture precision-guided missiles in Lebanon.⁸⁵

Given Syria's greater reliance on Iran due to its long civil war, Iran has sought to bolster Hezbollah by sending advanced weapons to Lebanon through Syria or by establishing other military sites on Syrian territory. In response, Israel has conducted thousands of airstrikes on Iran-backed targets that could present threats to its security.⁸⁶

Russia's advanced air defense systems in Syria could affect Israeli operations there.⁸⁷ Russia has reportedly shown some capacity to thwart Israeli airstrikes against Iranian or Syrian targets,⁸⁸ but has generally refrained via a deconfliction mechanism with Israel.⁸⁹ This deconfliction has apparently continued to date even with Russia's war on Ukraine, but Russia has criticized some Israeli strikes.⁹⁰ In May 2022, a Russian-origin S-300 air defense system in Syria reportedly fired on Israeli jets for the first time, raising questions about the status of Israel-Russia deconfliction.⁹¹

⁸¹ Amos Harel, "Israel's Saber-rattling on Iran Lacks One Critical Element," *haaretz.com*, May 20, 2022.

⁸² CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud; CRS In Focus IF10703, *Lebanese Hezbollah*, by Carla E. Humud.

⁸³ Orna Mizrahi and Yoram Schweitzer, "Hezbollah's Efforts to Restore its Domestic Standing: The Israeli Card," Institute for National Security Studies, March 9, 2022.

⁸⁴ See, e.g., "Hezbollah says it has doubled its arsenal of guided missiles," *Associated Press*, December 28, 2020; Ben Hubbard and Ronen Bergman, "Who Warns Hezbollah That Israeli Strikes Are Coming? Israel," *New York Times*, April 23, 2020.

⁸⁵ "Hezbollah claims it's making drones and missiles in Lebanon; chief offers export opportunity," *Associated Press*, February 16, 2022; Israeli Government Press Office, "DM Gantz Signs Seizure Order Against Lebanese Companies Supplying Hezbollah Project," February 6, 2022.

⁸⁶ Anna Ahronheim, "Thousands of airstrikes carried out by Israel in past five years," *jpost.com*, March 29, 2022.

⁸⁷ Paul Iddon, "Is Russia Helping Syria Intercept Israeli Missile Strikes?" *forbes.com*, July 30, 2021.

⁸⁸ Arie Egozi, "Israel Shifts to Standoff Weapons in Syria as Russian Threats Increase," *Breaking Defense*, July 27, 2021.

⁸⁹ Jacob Magid, "Russia says military coordination with Israel in Syria will continue as usual," *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2022.

⁹⁰ Anna Ahronheim, "Israel to increase military, civilian aid to Ukraine – report," *jpost.com*, May 4, 2022; Emanuel Fabian, "Shuttering Damascus airport, Israel ramps up its efforts to foil Iran arms transfers," *Times of Israel*, June 12, 2022.

⁹¹ Dan Parsons and Tyler Rogoway, "S-300 Surface-To-Air Missile Fired at Israeli Jets over Syria for First Time: Report," *The Drive*, May 16, 2022.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Israel has publicly condemned Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine through statements and votes in international fora. Meanwhile, it has sought to provide political support for Ukraine and humanitarian relief for Ukrainians—including allowing over 15,000 Jewish and non-Jewish refugees to enter Israel—without alienating Russia.⁹² As mentioned above, Israel has counted on airspace deconfliction with Russia to target Iranian personnel and equipment, especially those related to the transport of munitions or precision-weapons technology to Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁹³

Perhaps partly owing to Israel's careful stance on the conflict, Israeli officials have served in some instances as communicators between their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts.⁹⁴ Despite entreaties from Ukrainian officials, Israel has refrained to date from providing lethal assistance to Ukraine or approving third-party transfers of weapons with proprietary Israeli technology.⁹⁵ Under some Western pressure, Israel has contemplated providing defensive equipment, personal combat gear, and/or warning systems to Ukraine's military, partly to project to existing arms export clients that it would be a reliable supplier in crisis situations.⁹⁶ Israel announced an initial shipment of helmets and flak jackets to Ukrainian rescue forces and civilian organizations in May 2022.⁹⁷

While Israel has not directly joined Western economic sanctions against Russia, Foreign Minister Lapid has said that Israel is determined to prevent Russians from using Israel to bypass sanctions.⁹⁸ Observers debate the influence of prominent Russian or Russian-speaking Israelis within Israel.⁹⁹ In a March 2022 interview on Israeli television, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said, "You don't want to become the last haven for dirty money that's fueling Putin's wars."¹⁰⁰

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⁹² Isabel Kershner, "Israelis Debate How Many, and What Kind of, Refugees to Accept," *New York Times*, March 24, 2022.

⁹³ Zev Chafets, "Why Israel Won't Supply the Iron Dome to Ukraine," *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2022.

⁹⁴ Barak Ravid, "Israel's Bennett emerges as key mediator between Putin and Zelensky," *Axios*, March 9, 2022.

⁹⁵ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel rejects U.S. request to approve missile transfer to Ukraine," *Axios*, May 25, 2022.

⁹⁶ Yaniv Kubovich and Jonathan Lis, "Israeli Officials Inclined to Increase Ukraine Aid in Face of Russian Atrocities," *haaretz.com*, May 3, 2022; Anna Ahronheim, "Israel to increase military, civilian aid to Ukraine – report," *jpost.com*, May 4, 2022.

⁹⁷ "In first, Israel sends 2,000 helmets, 500 flak jackets to Ukraine," *Times of Israel*, May 18, 2022.

⁹⁸ Rina Bassist, "Israel vows country won't become safe haven for sanctioned Russian oligarchs," *Al-Monitor*, March 14, 2022.

⁹⁹ Patrick Kingsley, "Israel's Cautious Tone on Ukraine Puts Focus on Israeli Oligarchs," *New York Times*, April 11, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ "US official warns Israel: 'Don't be last haven for dirty money fueling Putin's war,'" *Times of Israel*, March 11, 2022.

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