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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:

Political instability and fall 2022 election. Israel has experienced a period of unprecedented political instability since April 2019. During this time, the country has held four elections with then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu facing criminal prosecution on political corruption charges. After the coalition government that replaced Netanyahu in June 2021 broke down in June 2022, another election—the fifth round in four years—is scheduled to take place on November 1, 2022. With the collapse of the coalition, Israel’s prime minister changed from Naftali Bennett of the Yamina party (who had held the office since June 2021) to Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid party. Lapid is to serve in a caretaker capacity along with Israel’s other cabinet ministers until a new Knesset installs a new government. The elections and the subsequent government formation process are likely to be a showdown between Netanyahu’s Likud party and the parties inclined to support him, and Prime Minister Lapid and others across the political spectrum who oppose Netanyahu leading another government.

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. Israel’s leaders have varying views about a possible U.S. return to 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. Russia has started action to close the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency for Israel, a move that could strain bilateral ties.

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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

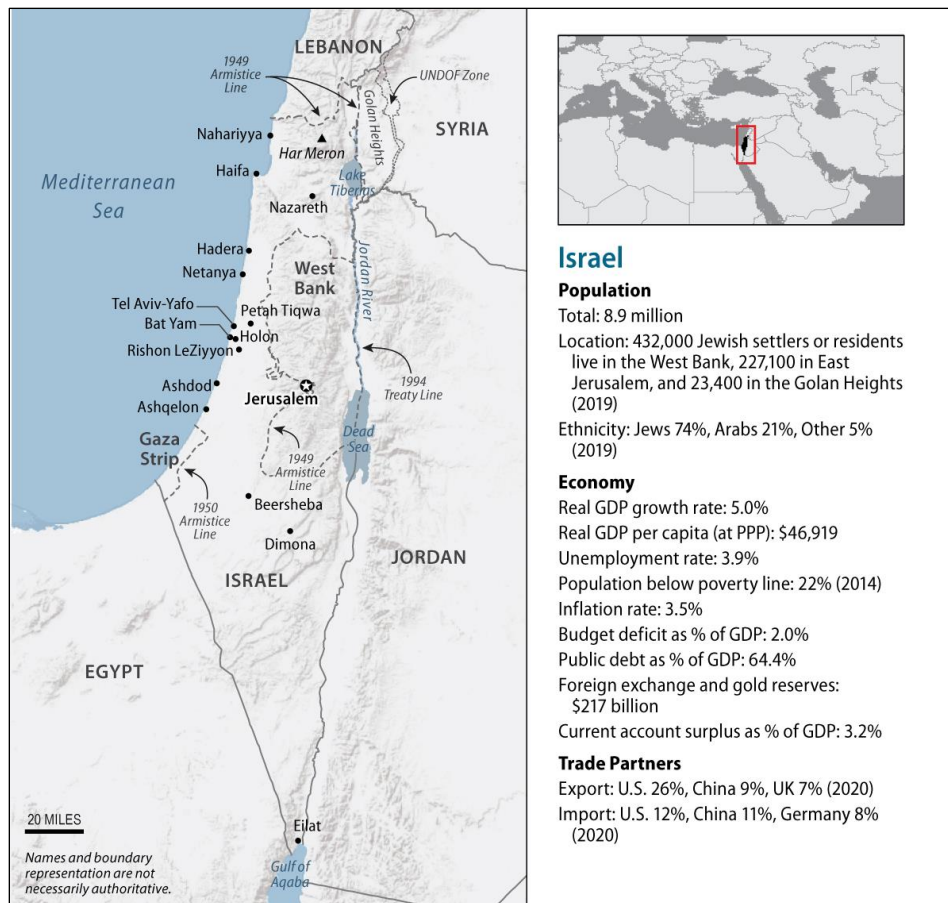
Additional issues to be discussed below with significant implications for U.S.-Israel relations include

- Israel’s ongoing political instability and the upcoming fall 2022 election.
- 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>.

Israeli Political Instability and Fall 2022 Election

Israel has experienced a period of unprecedented political instability since April 2019. During this time, the country has held four elections with then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu facing criminal prosecution on political corruption charges. After the coalition government that replaced Netanyahu in June 2021 broke down in June 2022 (as discussed below), another election—the fifth round in four years—is scheduled to take place on November 1, 2022. With the collapse of the coalition, Israel's prime minister changed from Naftali Bennett of the Yamina party (who had held the office since June 2021) to Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid party. Lapid is to serve in a

caretaker capacity along with Israel's other cabinet ministers (see **Table 1**) until a new Knesset installs a new government. Bennett, as alternate prime minister, is to maintain significant responsibility for Iran-related issues, but he has announced that he will not run in the fall election.

Table 1. Israeli Caretaker Government: Key Positions

Position	Name	Party
Prime Minister and Foreign Minister	Yair Lapid	Yesh Atid
Alternate Prime Minister	Naftali Bennett	Yamina
Defense Minister	Benny Gantz	Kahol Lavan
Finance Minister	Avigdor Lieberman	Yisrael Beitenu
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

Over nearly four years, Israel's efforts at establishing political leadership have unfolded as follows. Netanyahu was selected by Israel's president as the Knesset member best situated to form a government after both the April 2019 and September 2019 elections, but was unable to do so in either case—the first time such a stalemate had occurred in Israel. After the March 2020 election, Netanyahu formed a power-sharing government in May 2020 with Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan party, but the government collapsed later that year over a failure to pass a national budget.

The resulting election in March 2021 led to the replacement of Netanyahu's government by a wide-ranging but fractious coalition of parties in June 2021 (see **Appendix A**). While Bennett—a right-of-center figure—served as prime minister of this power-sharing government, the centrist Lapid played a leading role in arranging the coalition.

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 failed to pass after two members of Bennett's Yamina party left the coalition in hopes of bringing a more right-leaning government to power. To trigger an automatic renewal of the civilian laws' application to West Bank settlers, Bennett and Lapid got the Knesset to dissolve the coalition and vote for the election now scheduled for the fall. Under the government's power-sharing agreement, once the Knesset voted for a new election, Lapid (see text box below for a brief biography) became Israel's caretaker prime minister because members of Bennett's party were responsible for the coalition's demise.

Prime Minister Yair Lapid: Biography



Lapid, born in 1963, transitioned from a successful media career to politics in 2013, when he founded the centrist, pro-secular Yesh Atid (There is a Future) party. His father Tommy was also a media personality-turned-politician who led the Shinui (Change) party in the Knesset from 1999-2006 and served briefly as justice minister.

In the 2013 election, Yesh Atid had a surprising second-place finish and Lapid served as finance minister in the Netanyahu-led government from 2013 to 2015. Subsequently, Lapid has avoided allying with Netanyahu, and Yesh Atid appears to have displaced the Labor party as the leading political option for Israelis who do not support right-of-center parties.

Lapid and Yesh Atid joined a combined list with Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan to oppose Netanyahu for three straight elections beginning in April 2019, but split from Kahol Lavan when Gantz formed a power-sharing

government with Netanyahu in May 2020. After Yesh Atid's second-place finish in the March 2021 election, then-Israeli President Reuven Rivlin chose Lapid as the Knesset member best positioned to form a government. He established a power-sharing government in June 2021 featuring eight parties across Israel's political spectrum, serving as foreign minister and alternate prime minister as part of a rotation agreement with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of the Yamina party. Under the power-sharing agreement, Lapid became caretaker prime minister in July 2022 after members of Yamina caused the government's dissolution. In conducting Israel's foreign policy since June 2021, Lapid, Bennett, and Gantz have avoided major military conflict to date while supporting efforts to counter Iran, including in coordination with the United States and various Arab countries.

While he is constrained from major political initiatives while serving in a caretaker capacity, Lapid favors a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,³ and has expressed opposition to West Bank settlement construction that could impede such a solution—particularly in isolated areas away from settlement blocs closer to Israel.⁴ In past public statements, Lapid has said that he would not accept dividing Jerusalem with the Palestinians.⁵

The elections and the subsequent government formation process are likely to be a showdown between Netanyahu's Likud party and the parties inclined to support him, and Prime Minister Lapid's Yesh Atid party and others across the political spectrum who oppose Netanyahu leading another government. The previous coalition achieved little consensus on controversial subjects—the Palestinians, how to balance judicial review and majority rule, and religion's role in the state. Nevertheless, Lapid and Bennett maintain that this coalition competently addressed important issues such as Iran, the budget, and the COVID-19 crisis.⁶

Netanyahu's trial is ongoing and may continue for years without legally preventing him from leading a government. Some observers speculate that he might be open to political compromises with other parties in return for measures to end or disrupt his prosecution, even though Netanyahu denies this.⁷ Such compromises could include efforts to increase formal Israeli control over parts of the West Bank and reduce the judiciary's power over legislation or government action.

Itamar Ben Gvir and his Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party are possible Likud coalition partners—perhaps as part of a broader Religious Zionism electoral list—and have links with a Jewish ultra-nationalist movement based on the ideology of Meir Kahane (1932-1990).⁸ Kahane served in the Knesset from 1984 until 1988, when his party was banned from elections after Israel passed legislation disqualifying those who incite racism. The U.S. government has designated a Kahanist group (Kahane Chai) as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity, even though the government de-listed the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2022 due to its inactivity.⁹

The following could be significant factors regarding the elections and government formation process:

³ Josef Federman, "Lapid, set to be Israel's next premier, faces critical test," *Associated Press*, June 21, 2022.

⁴ Tovah Lazaroff, "Lapid, Gantz now control the fate of settlers in Israel's West Bank," *jpost.com*, June 20, 2022.

⁵ Noa Landau, "Yair Lapid Says Jerusalem Is Non-negotiable Even if It Means No Peace," *haaretz.com*, December 25, 2017.

⁶ Stephens, "Naftali Bennett's Exit Interview"; "Lapid says Bennett has shown responsibility, thanks him for friendship: 'I love you very much,'" *Times of Israel*, June 20, 2022.

⁷ Patrick Kingsley and Isabel Kershner, "As Government Collapses, Netanyahu Makes Case to Lead Israel Again," *New York Times*, June 22, 2022.

⁸ David B. Green, "Israel Election Results: Who Was Meir Kahane, and Why Is His Racist Legacy Relevant Again," *haaretz.com*, March 26, 2021.

⁹ State Department, "Revocation of Five Foreign Terrorist Organizations Designations and the Delisting of Six Deceased Individuals as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," May 20, 2022.

- **Another stalemate?** Initial polling suggests that Likud will probably win more votes than any other party, but pro- and anti-Netanyahu blocs may both have difficulty achieving Knesset support to form a government.¹⁰ In such an event, Lapid and other caretaker officials might continue in their positions through multiple election rounds, as Netanyahu did when serving in a caretaker capacity from December 2018 until May 2020.
- **Potential game changers.** The electoral math could change if some parties near the electoral threshold fall beneath it, or, alternatively, run with one or more other parties as a combined list. Other changes could come from key political figures entering or departing the political scene, or making new alignments. One such figure is Gadi Eizenkot, a prominent retired general and former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff. Additionally, the political future of the Yamina party without Bennett is in question.¹¹ Leaders of the Kahol Lavan, New Hope, and Yisrael Beiteinu parties all currently oppose sitting in government with Netanyahu, but also have a history of working with him. In July 2022, Kahol Lavan and New Hope agreed to run on a combined list in November's election, perhaps boosting Defense Minister Gantz's prime ministerial chances.
- **Arab-led parties.** As in the previous government, Arab-led parties could be decisive in determining future political outcomes. The Islamist United Arab List (UAL or Ra'am) was the first independent Arab party to join an Israeli government when it joined the Lapid-Bennett coalition in June 2021.¹² The Joint List (made up of three smaller parties with socialist or nationalist leanings) has stayed aloof from the pro- and anti-Netanyahu blocs to date. Voter turnout among Arab citizens of Israel has fluctuated between 45% and 65% in the past four elections,¹³ and could determine whether UAL reaches the electoral threshold, while also generally affecting Arab-led parties' ability to influence government formation or critical legislation.¹⁴

¹⁰ Michael Horovitz, "Polls point to return of dreaded deadlock in next elections, unless alliances shift," *Times of Israel*, June 21, 2022.

¹¹ Yossi Verter, "Israel's Government of Change Nears End Along With Bennet's Political Career," *haaretz.com*, June 21, 2022.

¹² Aaron Boxerman, "History made as Arab Israeli Ra'am party joins Bennett-Lapid coalition," *Times of Israel*, June 3, 2021.

¹³ Arik Rudnitzky, "The Arab Vote in the Elections for the 24th Knesset (March 2021)," Israel Democracy Institute, April 27, 2021.

¹⁴ "Israel's electoral threshold: Will it change and who will be affected?" *jpost.com*, June 26, 2022.

Israeli-Palestinian Issues¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Some Israeli settlement construction plans for East Jerusalem and the West Bank have advanced,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ In May 2022, Israel advanced plans for nearly 4,500 additional housing units for West Bank settlements,²⁰ drawing statements of strong opposition from the Administration.²¹

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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ This type of direct communication was a core aspect of the previous consulate general's independent status. Nevertheless, PA President Abbas continues to press for the reopening of the consulate.²⁸

¹⁵ See also CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

²⁴ State Department Press Briefing, November 3, 2021.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Jacob Magid, "US holding off on reopening Jerusalem consulate amid strong pushback from Israel," *Times of Israel*, December 15, 2021.

²⁷ Barak Ravid, "State Department separates Palestinian office from U.S. Embassy to Israel," *Axios*, June 9, 2022.

Israel has taken some steps to improve Palestinians' economic and living circumstances, including through loans and work permits.²⁹ 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.³⁰ During President Biden's July 2022 visit to Israel and the West Bank, the White House released a statement saying that Israel had committed to expanding the number of Palestinian work permits, 24-hour accessibility to the Allenby border crossing between the West Bank and Jordan, and efforts to upgrade the West Bank and Gaza to 4G communications infrastructure.³¹

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.³² Members of Congress have taken varying positions on human rights-related concerns.

Possible Downgrade of U.S. Security Coordinator

Some Members of Congress have opposed the Pentagon's stated plan to change the rank requirement for the U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the PA (USSC) from three-star general (or equivalent flag officer rank) to colonel (or equivalent).³³ The change is anticipated by the end of 2022 because of a legal requirement to reduce the number of active duty flag officers by 110 across the military, per Section 501 of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328), with several other posts around the world also affected. In June, 30 Senators sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, urging him to maintain the position's three-star rank requirement because of concerns a downgrade could undermine Israel-Palestinian

²⁰ Hagar Shezaf, "Israel Advances over 4,000 West Bank Housing Units for Jews," *haaretz.com*, May 12, 2022.

²¹ State Department Press Briefing, May 6, 2022.

²² CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

²³ 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.

²⁴ State Department Press Briefing, November 3, 2021.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Jacob Magid, "US holding off on reopening Jerusalem consulate amid strong pushback from Israel," *Times of Israel*, December 15, 2021.

²⁷ Barak Ravid, "State Department separates Palestinian office from U.S. Embassy to Israel," *Axios*, June 9, 2022.

²⁸ White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority in Joint Press Statement | Bethlehem, West Bank," July 15, 2022.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Neri Zilber, "Israel's new plan is to 'shrink,' not solve, the Palestinian conflict," *CNN*, September 16, 2021.

³¹ White House, "FACT SHEET: The United States-Palestinian Relationship,"

³² CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

³³ Jacob Magid, "Despite bipartisan opposition, US still plans to downgrade Jerusalem security post," *Times of Israel*, August 2, 2022. For background on the USSC and its functions, see CRS Report R46274, *The Palestinians and Amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act: U.S. Aid and Personal Jurisdiction*, by Jim Zanotti and Jennifer K. Elsea.

communication and U.S. leadership within the USSC's multilateral framework.³⁴ A few days later, 57 Representatives sent a similar letter.³⁵ One source has reported that the State Department, Israel, and the PA have reservations about the proposed change.³⁶

Observers have debated the issue. Some former U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian officials assert that having a flag officer is essential to maintaining U.S. credibility and influence regarding Israeli-Palestinian security coordination, especially at a time when security conditions may be deteriorating (as discussed below).³⁷ From another perspective, a retired Israeli general has said that the USSC position became less important during the Obama and Trump Administrations in providing material assistance for the PA and shaping the U.S. regional role.³⁸

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, Israeli-Palestinian violence has resulted to date in the deaths of 19 Israelis or foreigners in Israel and more than 40 Palestinians,³⁹ amid the following:

- Protests and violent altercations around Jerusalem holy sites, including during religious holidays and other sensitive times commemorating historical events.⁴⁰
- Heightened Israeli and PA security measures to counter alleged Palestinian lawlessness and militancy in West Bank cities such as Jenin.⁴¹

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.”⁴² Some evidence suggests that the shot may have come from Israeli forces,⁴³ with the PA claiming that its investigation proves Israeli forces deliberately targeted Abu Akleh, but

³⁴ Text of letter available at <https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Ossoff-Graham-USSC-Letter.pdf>.

³⁵ Text available at <https://jewishinsider.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/23210039/Letter-to-Sec.-Austin-With-Watermark.pdf>.

³⁶ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Pentagon weighs downgrading rank of U.S. Palestinian security post,” *Axios*, June 1, 2022.

³⁷ Shira Efron and Ghaith al-Omari, “How Pentagon Bureaucracy Could Undermine West Bank Security,” *Israel Policy Forum*, June 16, 2022; Amos Gilead and Jonathan Lord, cited in Aaron Mehta and Arie Egozi, “US-Israel-Palestine security role facing downgrade; can a colonel do a general's job?” *Breaking Defense*, August 5, 2022.

³⁸ Eitan Dangot, cited in Aaron Mehta and Arie Egozi, “US-Israel-Palestine security role facing downgrade.”

³⁹ David S. Cloud and Anas Baba, “Israeli Work Permits Ease Gaza Tensions,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2022.

⁴⁰ CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁴¹ Ahmad Melhem, “Israeli forces find tough resistance in Jenin camp,” *Al-Monitor*, May 25, 2022.

⁴² State Department Press Briefing, May 11, 2022.

⁴³ Josef Federman, “Bellingcat probe suggests Israeli fire most likely killed journalist; but not 100%,” May 16, 2022.

Israel denying any such intent.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

After some Members of the House and Senate sent letters to the executive branch requesting that the State Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation conduct an independent investigation into Abu Akleh's death,⁴⁶ the State Department issued a statement in July. The statement said that the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) for Israel and the Palestinian Authority oversaw an independent process, and in summarizing Israeli and PA investigations concluded that Israeli gunfire likely killed Abu Akleh, but "found no reason to believe that this was intentional."⁴⁷ PA officials and members of Abu Akleh's family have publicly criticized the part of the USSC's finding regarding intent.⁴⁸ While visiting Bethlehem in July, President Biden said that the United States "will continue to insist on a full transparent accounting of her death."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ "Palestinian officials: Israel killed Al Jazeera reporter," *Associated Press*, May 26, 2022.

⁴⁵ International Federation of Journalists, "Palestine: ICC case filed over systematic targeting of Palestinian journalists," April 26, 2022.

⁴⁶ Text of letters available at <https://carson.house.gov/sites/carson.house.gov/files/Carson%20Shireen%20Abu%20Abkleh%20signed.pdf> and [https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Final%20Abu%20Akleh%20Letter%20\(PDF\).pdf](https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Final%20Abu%20Akleh%20Letter%20(PDF).pdf).

⁴⁷ State Department press statement, "On the Killing of Shireen Abu Akleh," July 4, 2022.

⁴⁸ "US: Israeli fire likely killed reporter; no final conclusion," *Associated Press*, July 4, 2022.

⁴⁹ White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas."

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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 2014.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

For three days in early August 2022, Israel and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) militants in Gaza exchanged fire. Hamas stayed out of the violence. A few days before that, Israel had arrested a PIJ leader in the West Bank, and PIJ threats of retaliation led to lockdowns in much of southern Israel. Israel conducted its military operation with the stated aim of thwarting any possible retaliation, and Israeli officials claimed to have killed the top echelon of PIJ militants in Gaza. More than 40 Palestinians died and hundreds more were injured, with some of these casualties possibly resulting from errant Palestinian rockets; several Israelis were injured, but no Israeli deaths were reported.⁵⁶ The Iron Dome anti-rocket system intercepted several PIJ projectiles.⁵⁷ After a cease-fire took hold on August 7, President Biden thanked Egyptian and Qatari officials for helping broker an end to hostilities while expressing support for Israel's right to defend itself and lamenting civilian casualties.⁵⁸ A similar round of violence between Israel and PIJ (with Hamas abstaining) took place in November 2019.

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.⁵⁹ In 2021, Israel opened embassies in the UAE and Bahrain, and both

⁵⁰ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² David Makovsky, "Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 25, 2021.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Aaron Boxerman, "UN to begin dispensing Qatari cash to needy Gazan families Monday under new deal," *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021.

⁵⁵ Yaniv Kubovich, "Egypt, Qatar Reach Breakthrough on Hamas Civil Servants Salaries," *haaretz.com*, November 29, 2021; Abu Amer, "Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas."

⁵⁶ Dov Lieber and Aaron Boxerman, "Palestinian Militants, Israel Set Cease-Fire," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2022.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ White House, "Statement by President Biden on the Ceasefire in Gaza," August 7, 2022.

⁵⁹ 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

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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ One exception is that implementing Israel-Sudan normalization appears to be on hold following the Sudanese military's seizure of power in October 2021.⁶² 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.”⁶³ However, the Biden Administration appetite for offering major U.S. policy inducements to countries in connection with normalization efforts remains unclear.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ In June 2022, Secretary Blinken said that Saudi Arabia is a “critical partner” of the United States in

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.

⁶⁰ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Jake Sullivan discussed Saudi-Israel normalization with MBS,” *Axios*, October 20, 2021.

⁶¹ “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.

⁶² 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.

⁶³ 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.

⁶⁴ Michael Koplow et al., “Biden has an opportunity to put his own stamp on Arab-Israeli relations,” *The Hill*, October 14, 2021.

⁶⁵ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Joint Press Statements at the Conclusion of the Negev Summit,” March 28, 2022.

⁶⁶ Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, “Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal,” *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

⁶⁷ Dion Nissenbaum, “Saudis Expand Talks with Israel,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2022.

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.”⁶⁸

While senior Saudi officials say that full Israel-Saudi normalization still remains contingent on progress with Palestinian issues,⁶⁹ the two countries are reportedly engaging in serious talks in the meantime to build business ties and coordinate on regional security matters. During President Biden’s trip to the region in July 2022, he announced certain steps that could point toward eventual normalization. These steps included the opening of Saudi airspace to Israeli civilian overflights, and an arrangement that is to allow Saudi Arabia to take full control of the Red Sea islands Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt while guaranteeing Israel’s freedom of navigation, despite the planned withdrawal of a Multinational Force and Observers peacekeeping contingent that includes U.S. troops.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ Israel had previously been under the purview of U.S. European Command. CENTCOM formalized Israel’s move in September 2021,⁷² and in October an Israeli Defense Forces liaison was stationed at CENTCOM headquarters.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵ Earlier, both Morocco (November 2021) and Bahrain (February 2022) signed MOUs with Israel on security cooperation.⁷⁶ 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, soon-to-be CENTCOM Commander and General Michael Kurilla testified that Israel and other

⁶⁸ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the Foreign Affairs Magazine Centennial Celebration,” June 1, 2022.

⁶⁹ Jacob Magid, “Saudi minister: Peace with Israel ‘strategic option’ but not before 2-state solution,” *Times of Israel*, July 16, 2022.

⁷⁰ White House, “FACT SHEET: Results of Bilateral Meeting Between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” July 15, 2022.

⁷¹ Jared Szuba, “Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift,” *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2021.

⁷² U.S. Central Command, “U.S. Central Command Statement on the Realignment of the State of Israel,” September 1, 2021.

⁷³ Judah Ari Gross, “IDF liaison sets up shop in US CENTCOM offices in Florida, solidifying move,” *The Times of Israel*, October 29, 2021.

⁷⁴ “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>.

⁷⁵ Arie Egozi, “Amid attacks, UAE quietly asks Israel about defense systems: Sources,” *Breaking Defense*, January 25, 2022.

⁷⁶ 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.

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.⁷⁷ Speculation about specific measures has continued since then,⁷⁸ and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said in June 2022 that a “Middle East Air Defense Alliance” is already working together with the United States.⁷⁹ Reports in July suggest that while some air defense coordination may be taking place between Israel, certain Arab states, and the United States, “Arab participants are reluctant to confirm their involvement, let alone advertise their participation in a fully fledged military alliance.”⁸⁰ One obstacle could be the apparent reluctance of regional countries to share the real-time intelligence data that underlies basic threat information they might be more willing to share.⁸¹

Selected congressional actions. In January 2022, some Members of the Senate and House formed bipartisan caucuses to promote the Abraham Accords.⁸² In March, Congress enacted the 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 (S. 4366 and H.R. 7987). The bill has provisions that 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. Large portions of the bill have been incorporated as amendments to the House Armed Services Committee version (H.R. 7900) and Senate Armed Services Committee version (S. 4543) of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2023.

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

⁷⁷ “Israel reportedly working on air defense pact with regional allies,” *Times of Israel*, March 29, 2022.

⁷⁸ “Israeli radars to be used in UAE to detect Iran missiles, drones – report,” *jpost.com*, June 28, 2022; “Israel to ask Biden for okay to provide air defense laser to Saudi Arabia – report,” *Times of Israel*, June 28, 2022.

⁷⁹ Patrick Kingsley and Ronen Bergman, “Israel Grows Military Role with Alliance Against Iran,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2022.

⁸⁰ Ronen Bergman and Patrick Kingsley, “Israel Destroys Iranian Drones as Arabs Assist,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2022. See also Dion Nissenbaum and Dov Lieber, “U.S. Presses for Stronger Israeli-Arab Security Ties,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2022.

⁸¹ Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, “Biden wants a Middle East air defense ‘alliance.’ But it’s a long way off,” *Politico*, July 12, 2022.

⁸² For more information, see <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Senate%20Abraham%20Accords%20Caucus%20Mission%20Statement.pdf>.

coordinated drone and missile attacks have implications for Israeli security calculations.⁸³ 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."⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ In June 2022, then-Prime Minister Bennett characterized some operations inside Iran in the past year as targeting the "head of the octopus" to counter a range of Iranian military capabilities.⁸⁷

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, then-Prime Minister Bennett stated that Israel would not be bound by a return to the JCPOA.⁸⁸ A January 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."⁸⁹ During his time as prime minister, Bennett opposed the deal,⁹⁰ but largely abstained from involvement in U.S. debates on the issue.⁹¹ Prime Minister Yair Lapid replaced Bennett in July 2022 and has maintained a consistent stance on the issue.⁹²

As international discussions around the JCPOA continued in March 2022, Bennett and then-Foreign Minister Lapid issued a joint statement arguing against reports that the United States

⁸³ 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.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Seth J. Frantzman, "Iran and Hezbollah analyze Israel's 'war between the wars,'" *jpost.com*, November 14, 2021.

⁸⁵ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Iran Nears an Atomic Milestone," *New York Times*, September 13, 2021.

⁸⁶ 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.

⁸⁷ Dion Nissenbaum et al., "Israel Widens Covert Actions to Rein in Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2022.

⁸⁸ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "PM Bennett's Remarks at the Security and Policy Conference of the Institute for Policy and Strategy Conference, Reichman University," November 23, 2021.

⁸⁹ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel's military intel chief says Iran deal better than no deal," *Axios*, January 5, 2022. See also Ronen Bergman, "Israel's Military Leans in Favor of Iran Nuclear Deal. Its Spy Agency Won't Budge," *New York Times*, July 15, 2022.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Lis, "Bennett Announces Laser-based Missile Defense System 'Within a Year,'" *haaretz.com*, February 1, 2022.

⁹¹ "Bennett says he won't pick public fight with US over Iran nuclear deal," *Times of Israel*, March 21, 2022.

⁹² Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "PM Lapid's Remarks at the Start of the Weekly Cabinet Meeting," July 17, 2022.

might remove Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from its Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list in exchange for a promise not to harm Americans.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ Later in May, Bennett claimed that President Biden told him in April that he would not de-list the IRGC.⁹⁶ During his July 2022 trip to Israel, President Biden confirmed that he would not remove the IRGC from the FTO list.⁹⁷

During President Biden's trip to Israel in July, he and Prime Minister Lapid signed the Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration, which included a U.S. commitment "never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon," and a statement that the United States "is prepared to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome."⁹⁸ Reportedly, Lapid said to Biden that talks regarding the JCPOA must have a deadline. Biden has not specified a deadline and said that diplomacy was his preferred method to resolve the issue, but also said that "we're not going to wait forever."⁹⁹ Additionally, Biden said that he would be willing to use force against Iran as a "last resort" to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁰ Lapid said that Israel wants a credible military threat to be the basis for international negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue, and that the United States "didn't necessarily agree on this" during President Biden's visit.¹⁰¹

One source reported in May 2022 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.¹⁰² Various sources document reported Israeli covert or military operations targeting Iran's nuclear program,¹⁰³ and some U.S. officials have reportedly differed with Israeli counterparts on the overall effectiveness of such operations.¹⁰⁴ Even with reported upgrades to Israeli military capabilities,¹⁰⁵ questions apparently remain about military readiness for a major operation against Iran's nuclear program.¹⁰⁶

⁹³ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Announcement from PM Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid," March 18, 2022.

⁹⁴ Transcript available at <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-6518577?11>.

⁹⁵ 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.

⁹⁶ Jacob Magid, "Bennett: Biden notified me last month of decision to keep Iran Guards on terror list," *Times of Israel*, May 25, 2022.

⁹⁷ "Biden delivers tough talk on Iran as he opens Mideast visit," *Associated Press*, July 15, 2022.

⁹⁸ White House, "The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration," July 14, 2022.

⁹⁹ Lahav Harkov, "Biden says US won't wait forever for Iran deal, doesn't set deadline," *jpost.com*, July 14, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ "Biden delivers tough talk on Iran as he opens Mideast visit."

¹⁰¹ "Lapid: Israel, US don't 'necessarily agree' on need for military threat against Iran," *Times of Israel*, July 17, 2022.

¹⁰² Ben Caspit, "Israeli leadership divided on Iran deal," *Al-Monitor*, May 27, 2022.

¹⁰³ "Iran foils Israel-linked 'sabotage' plot at nuclear plant," *Agence France Presse*, March 15, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ David E. Sanger et al., "Israeli Attacks Spur Upgrade of Iran Sites," *New York Times*, November 22, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ "Israel makes dramatic upgrades to military plans to attack Iran," *jpost.com* (citing Walla!), June 8, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Amos Harel, "Israel's Saber-rattling on Iran Lacks One Critical Element," *haaretz.com*, May 20, 2022.

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.¹⁰⁷ Speculation persists about the potential for wider conflict and its implications, including from incursions into Israeli airspace by Hezbollah drones.¹⁰⁸

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.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹

Russia's advanced air defense systems in Syria could affect Israeli operations there.¹¹² Russia has reportedly shown some capacity to thwart Israeli airstrikes against Iranian or Syrian targets,¹¹³ but has generally refrained via a deconfliction mechanism with Israel.¹¹⁴ This deconfliction has apparently continued to date even with Russia's war on Ukraine, but Russia has criticized some Israeli strikes.¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶

In June and July 2022, Israel's military has intercepted Hezbollah drones heading either for the Israel-Lebanon border or Israeli infrastructure at the Karish offshore gas field that is the subject of an Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary dispute. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has threatened additional action and said that Hezbollah is prepared to go to war over the gas field dispute.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁷ CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud; CRS In Focus IF10703, *Lebanese Hezbollah*, by Carla E. Humud.

¹⁰⁸ Orna Mizrahi and Yoram Schweitzer, "Hezbollah's Efforts to Restore its Domestic Standing: The Israeli Card," Institute for National Security Studies, March 9, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ 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.

¹¹⁰ "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.

¹¹¹ Anna Ahronheim, "Thousands of airstrikes carried out by Israel in past five years," *jpost.com*, March 29, 2022.

¹¹² Paul Iddon, "Is Russia Helping Syria Intercept Israeli Missile Strikes?" *forbes.com*, July 30, 2021.

¹¹³ Arie Egozi, "Israel Shifts to Standoff Weapons in Syria as Russian Threats Increase," *Breaking Defense*, July 27, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Jacob Magid, "Russia says military coordination with Israel in Syria will continue as usual," *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2022.

¹¹⁵ 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.

¹¹⁶ 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.

¹¹⁷ Tobias Siegal, "Nasrallah threatens war over Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute," *Times of Israel*, July 13,

prompting responses from Prime Minister Lapid and Defense Minister Gantz warning against escalation and stating Israel's readiness to act against any threat and its interest in Lebanon's stability and prosperity.¹¹⁸

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 around 35,000 Jewish and non-Jewish refugees to enter Israel—without alienating Russia.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰

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.¹²¹ 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.¹²² Starting in May 2022, Israel has sent some protective gear to Ukrainian rescue forces and civilian organizations.¹²³

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.¹²⁴ Observers debate the influence of prominent Russian or Russian-speaking Israelis within Israel.¹²⁵ 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."¹²⁶

In July 2022, Russia's Justice Ministry signaled to Israel that it is seeking to close the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency for Israel, an entity that has branches around the world to facilitate emigration to Israel and run cultural and language education program in coordination with Israel. Russia is claiming that the agency has violated privacy laws by storing personal information about emigration applicants, but many Israelis suspect that Russian concerns about Israeli policy

2022.

¹¹⁸ Emanuel Fabian, "Lapid, Gantz warn that Hezbollah drones, threats could lead region to 'escalation,'" *Times of Israel*, July 19, 2022.

¹¹⁹ Isabel Kershner, "Israelis Debate How Many, and What Kind of, Refugees to Accept," *New York Times*, March 24, 2022; Bret Stephens, "Naftali Bennett's Exit Interview," *New York Times*, June 21, 2022.

¹²⁰ Zev Chafets, "Why Israel Won't Supply the Iron Dome to Ukraine," *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2022.

¹²¹ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel rejects U.S. request to approve missile transfer to Ukraine," *Axios*, May 25, 2022.

¹²² 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.

¹²³ Emanuel Fabian, "Israel to send new batch of defensive equipment to Ukraine," *Times of Israel*, July 12, 2022; "In first, Israel sends 2,000 helmets, 500 flak jackets to Ukraine," *Times of Israel*, May 18, 2022.

¹²⁴ Rina Bassist, "Israel vows country won't become safe haven for sanctioned Russian oligarchs," *Al-Monitor*, March 14, 2022.

¹²⁵ Patrick Kingsley, "Israel's Cautious Tone on Ukraine Puts Focus on Israeli Oligarchs," *New York Times*, April 11, 2022.

¹²⁶ "US official warns Israel: 'Don't be last haven for dirty money fueling Putin's war,'" *Times of Israel*, March 11, 2022.

on Ukraine and possibly Syria and Jerusalem may be motivating the pending legal action.¹²⁷ Prime Minister Lapid has warned Russia that closing the agency's Russian branch would be a "grave event" with consequences for Israel-Russia relations.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Anton Troianovski and Isabel Kershner, "Russia Moves to Shut Down Agency Handling Emigration to Israel," *New York Times*, July 22, 2022.

¹²⁸ Judah Ari Gross, "Lapid warns Russia: Jewish Agency closure would be 'grave event' with impact on ties," *Times of Israel*, July 24, 2022.

Appendix A. Main Israeli Parties and Their Leaders

RIGHT



Likud (Consolidation) – 30 Knesset seats

Israel's historical repository of right-of-center nationalist ideology; skeptical of territorial compromise; has also championed free-market policies.

Leader: Benjamin Netanyahu

Born in 1949, Netanyahu served as prime minister from 2009 to June 2021, and also was prime minister from 1996 to 1999. Netanyahu served in an elite special forces unit (Sayeret Matkal), and received his higher education at MIT. Throughout a career in politics and diplomacy, he has been renowned both for his skepticism regarding the exchange of land for peace with the Palestinians and his desire to counter Iran's nuclear program and regional influence. He is generally regarded as both a consummate political dealmaker and a security-minded nationalist.



Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) – 7 seats

Pro-secular, right-of-center nationalist party with base of support among Russian speakers from the former Soviet Union. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Avigdor Lieberman

Born in 1958, Lieberman is Israel's finance minister, and has previously served as defense minister and foreign minister. He is generally viewed as an ardent nationalist and canny political actor with prime ministerial aspirations. Lieberman was born in the Soviet Union (in what is now Moldova) and immigrated to Israel in 1978. He worked under Netanyahu from 1988 to 1997. Disillusioned by Netanyahu's willingness to consider concessions to the Palestinians, Lieberman founded Yisrael Beiteinu as a platform for former Soviet immigrants. He was acquitted of corruption allegations in a 2013 case.



Yamina (Right) – 6 seats

Right-of-center merger of three parties: New Right, Jewish Home, and National Union; base of support among religious Zionists (mostly Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews); includes core constituencies supporting West Bank settlements and annexation. A majority of its members were part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Ayelet Shaked

Born in 1976, Shaked had a brief career as a software engineer before entering politics and working under Netanyahu from 2006 to 2010. She was first elected to the Knesset in 2013 and has been a close political colleague of former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, serving previously as justice minister and now as interior minister. She resigned her Knesset seat shortly after becoming interior minister in June 2021. She favors the eventual annexation of most West Bank settlements and autonomy short of statehood for the Palestinians. She also supports a greater role for Jewish nationalism in law and society and a reduced role for the judiciary.



New Hope (Tikva Hadasha) – 6 seats

New Hope is a party formed in 2020 as an alternative to Prime Minister Netanyahu and Likud for mainstream right-wing voters. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Gideon Sa'ar

Born in 1966, Sa'ar serves as justice minister. He served as cabinet secretary in the 1990s (for Prime Minister Netanyahu) and early 2000s (for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon). He became an influential and popular member of Likud, first elected to the Knesset in 2003. He served as education minister from 2009 to 2013 and interior minister from 2013 to 2014. After leaving the Knesset in 2014, he returned in 2019 but left Likud to form New Hope a year later.



Religious Zionism (HaTzionut HaDatit) – 6 seats

Grouping of right-of-center parties including Religious Zionism/National Union-Tkuma, Otzma Yehudit, and Noam that formed for the March 2021 elections.

Leader: Bezalel Smotrich

Born in 1980, Smotrich has headed the underlying party that leads Religious Zionism since 2019. A trained lawyer, he has engaged in regular activism to promote Jewish nationalist and religiously conservative causes.

LEFT



Labor (Avoda) – 7 seats

Labor is Israel's historical repository of social democratic, left-of-center, pro-secular Zionist ideology; associated with efforts to end Israel's responsibility for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Merav Michaeli

Born in 1966, Michaeli is transportation minister. She became Labor's leader in 2020 and was first elected to the Knesset in 2013. Before entering national politics, she founded and headed an organization that supports victims of sexual assault, and was a regular national media presence and university lecturer.



Meretz (Vigor) – 6 seats

Meretz is a pro-secular Zionist party that supports initiatives for social justice and peace with the Palestinians. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Nitzan Horowitz

Born in 1965, Horowitz is health minister. He became Meretz's leader in 2019 and was first elected to the Knesset in 2009. He had a long career as a prominent journalist before entering politics. He announced in July 2022 that he would not lead the party in the November 2022 election.

CENTER



Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) – 17 seats

Yesh Atid is a centrist party in existence since 2012 that has championed socioeconomic issues such as cost of living and has taken a pro-secular stance. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Prime Minister Yair Lapid (biography in text box in the main body of the report)



Kahol Lavan (Blue and White) – 8 seats

Centrist party formed in 2018 as an alternative to Likud that claimed itself more committed to preserving long-standing Israeli institutions such as the judiciary, articulating a vision of Israeli nationalism more inclusive of Druze and Arab citizens, and having greater sensitivity to international opinion on Israeli-Palestinian issues. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Benny Gantz

Born in 1959, Gantz is Israel's defense minister. He served as Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces from 2011 to 2015.

ULTRA-ORTHODOX



Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians) – 9 seats

Mizrahi Haredi (“ultra-Orthodox”) party; favors welfare and education funds in support of Haredi lifestyle; opposes compromise with Palestinians on control over Jerusalem.

Leader: Aryeh Deri

Born in 1959, Deri led Shas from 1983 to 1999 before being convicted for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust in 1999 for actions taken while serving as interior minister. He returned as the party’s leader in 2013. In January 2022, he resigned his Knesset seat in connection with a criminal plea deal involving tax-related offenses, but maintained his leadership of the party.



United Torah Judaism – 7 seats

Ashkenazi Haredi coalition (Agudat Yisrael and Degel Ha’torah); favors welfare and education funds in support of Haredi lifestyle; opposes territorial compromise with Palestinians and conscription of Haredim; generally seeks greater application of its interpretation of traditional Jewish law.

Leader: Moshe Gafni

Born in 1952, Gafni was educated in a yeshiva (traditional Jewish school) and headed a kollel (institute for advanced rabbinic study). He was first elected to the Knesset in 1988.

ARAB



Joint List – 6 seats

Electoral slate featuring three Arab parties that combine socialist and Arab nationalist political strains: Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), Ta’al (Arab Movement for Renewal), and Balad (National Democratic Assembly).

Leader: Ayman Odeh

Born in 1975, Odeh is the leader of Hadash, an Arab Israeli socialist party, and of the Joint List. An attorney, he served on the Haifa city council before becoming Hadash’s national leader in 2006.



United Arab List (UAL or Ra’am) – 4 seats

Islamist Arab party that embodies conservative social values while seeking state support to improve Arabs’ socioeconomic position within Israel. Part of the 2021-2022 coalition.

Leader: Mansour Abbas

Born in 1974, Abbas has led the UAL since 2007 and is a qualified dentist. He led the UAL into the previous coalition in June 2021 after receiving promises that the government would focus more resources and attention on socioeconomic help for Arab Israelis.

Sources: Various open sources.

Notes: Knesset seat numbers based on results from the March 23, 2021, election. Yamina expelled Knesset member Amichai Chikli in April 2022.

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