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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 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:

November 2022 election and Netanyahu's likely return to power. After elections held on November 1, 2022, for Israel's Knesset (parliament), Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu appears to be headed back to the prime minister's post that he held twice previously (1996-1999 and 2009-2021). The 2022 election was the fifth held in Israel since a formal process began in December 2018 addressing corruption allegations against Netanyahu. Two of the previous four elections did not result in the formation of a government, and the other two resulted in short-lived coalition governments—a 2020-2021 government with Netanyahu as prime minister, and a 2021-2022 government without him. Until Netanyahu or someone else forms a government with Knesset backing, Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party will serve as caretaker prime minister. The rise of the ultra-nationalist Religious Zionism faction as a likely Netanyahu coalition partner has triggered debate about the implications for Israel's democracy, its ability to manage tensions with Arabs and Palestinians, and its relations with the United States and other countries.

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 have regularly spoken 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. Israeli-Palestinian violence in 2022 and increased West Bank militancy has triggered heightened counterterrorism measures and some controversy, including in relation to the killing of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, a U.S. citizen who was a resident of East Jerusalem. 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 other Arab and 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 and other regional dynamics. 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 reportedly have varying views about a possible U.S. return to the agreement and the general handling of the issue. 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. Via U.S. mediation, Israel and Lebanon—which do not have formal relations—reached agreement in October 2022 on maritime boundaries to allow both countries to extract offshore natural gas.

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 directly provided lethal assistance to Ukraine, but has provided basic intelligence to counter Iran-made drones used by Russia. Since 2015, Russia's defense capabilities in Syria have prompted Israel to deconflict its airstrikes there with Russia. Legal action in Russia is pending that might 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 **Appendix A** 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 (both of which are U.S.-designated terrorist organizations). Some 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

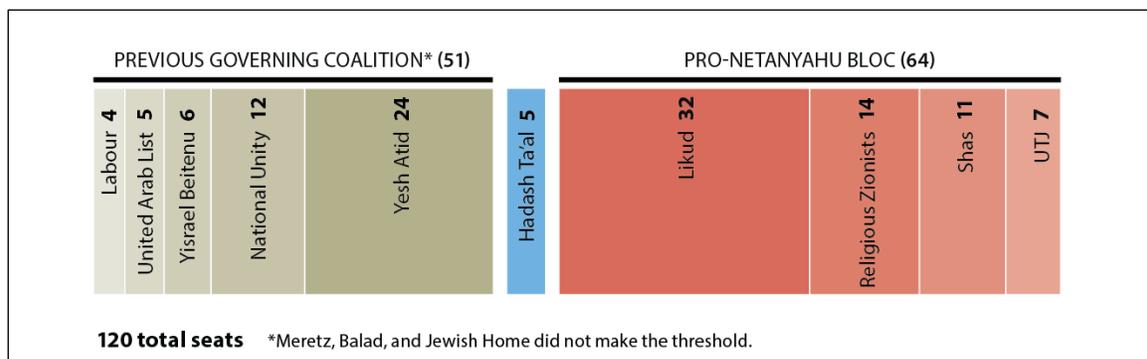
Additional issues to be discussed below with significant implications for U.S.-Israel relations include

- Israel’s November 2022 election and the likely return to power of Benjamin Netanyahu, perhaps in a government with figures who could complicate relations and interactions with the Biden Administration and Congress.
- Israeli-Palestinian problems and their implications for U.S. policy.
- Israel’s relations with various Arab states since the Abraham Accords.
- Concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and regional influence, including with Lebanon-based Hezbollah and in Syria.
- Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

November 2022 Election and Netanyahu’s Likely Return to Power

After elections held on November 1, 2022, for Israel’s Knesset (parliament), Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu appears to be headed back to the prime minister’s post that he held twice previously (1996-1999 and 2009-2021). Parties supporting Netanyahu obtained 64 out of 120 seats in the Knesset (see **Figure 1** and **Appendix B**).

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.

Figure I. November 2022 Knesset Election Results

Source: Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, with graphic adapted by CRS.

The 2022 election was the fifth held in Israel since a formal process began in December 2018 addressing corruption allegations against Netanyahu. Two of the previous four elections did not result in the formation of a government, and the other two resulted in short-lived coalition governments—a 2020-2021 government with Netanyahu as prime minister, and a 2021-2022 government without him. Until Netanyahu or someone else forms a government with Knesset backing, Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party will serve as caretaker prime minister.

On November 13, Israeli President Isaac Herzog assigned Netanyahu to form a government. From that date, Netanyahu has 28 days to assemble a coalition, and the president can extend this period for an additional 14 days, with provisions allowing the president to authorize others to form a government if Netanyahu is unsuccessful in the task. A successful vote of confidence in the Knesset would install a new government. If there is insufficient support, another round of elections would take place.

For the first time since Netanyahu's corruption allegations surfaced,² he appears to have won a Knesset majority with his right-of-center Likud party and other parties that support his return to power: the ultra-nationalist Religious Zionism slate and the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties. Netanyahu made efforts during the campaign to ensure that Itamar Ben Gvir and his Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party stayed within the Religious Zionism electoral list so that the list would clear the electoral threshold;³ it is now the third-largest faction in the Knesset. Some reports suggest that Jewish Israeli concerns about Arab-Jewish violence since 2021 and the inclusion of an Arab-led party (the United Arab List) in the previous government coalition may have partly driven support for Religious Zionism.⁴

Religious Zionism's Rise and Its Implications

The rise of Religious Zionism has triggered debate about the implications for Israel's democracy, its ability to manage tensions with its Arab citizens and with Palestinians, and its relations with the United States and other countries.⁵ The electoral list's two leading figures, Bezael Smotrich

² For information on the allegations, see Yonette Joseph and Patrick Kingsley, "Netanyahu Will Return with Corruption Charges Unresolved. Here's Where the Case Stands," *New York Times*, November 3, 2022.

³ Israeli election law requires that an electoral list receive at least 3.25% of the popular vote to be represented in the Knesset.

⁴ Neri Zilber, "For Israel's hard-right alliance, how high a priority is democracy?" *Christian Science Monitor*, November 11, 2022; Patrick Kingsley, "Anxiety About Jewish Identity Drives Israel's Lurch Toward Far Right," *New York Times*, November 6, 2022.

⁵ Dov Lieber, et al., "Religious Zionism Flexes Its Muscles," *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2022; Laura Kelly and

and Ben Gvir, openly support policies to favor Israel's Jewish citizens over its Arab citizens and annex the West Bank.⁶ Religious Zionism leaders aspire to cabinet positions giving them greater control over West Bank issues.⁷ Additionally, they advocate legislation that would allow the Knesset to override decisions from Israel's High Court of Justice (or Supreme Court).⁸ According to the *Wall Street Journal*:

If the law is passed, lawmakers in Mr. Netanyahu's bloc say they aim to quickly overturn judicial rulings striking down the yearslong detention of African asylum seekers, a law retroactively legalizing illegal Israeli outposts built on private Palestinian land and a law formally excluding ultraorthodox Israelis from the country's mandatory military service....

Critics of the judicial overhaul say it will undermine Israel's democracy by giving absolute power to the ruling coalition and leave minorities without protection from the will of the majority. Advocates for the changes say they will restore power to elected officials hamstrung by activist judges.⁹

A Netanyahu-led coalition reliant on Religious Zionism and ultra-Orthodox parties may lead to political shifts favoring stricter application of Jewish law in society, including less inclusion of women in state religious councils and some rollback of LGBTQ rights.¹⁰ However, some observers expect secular figures within Likud—including possibly Netanyahu himself—to limit the changes.¹¹

Ben Gvir once belonged to Kach, a movement based on the racist ideology of former Knesset member Meir Kahane (1932-1990) that was finally banned from elections in the 1990s.¹² A Kahanist offshoot of Kach (Kahane Chai) was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States from 1997 until 2022 and remains a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity.¹³ Ben Gvir was convicted in 2007 for incitement to racism and supporting terrorism,¹⁴ but says that he has moderated his positions and does not generalize about Arabs.¹⁵ Ben Gvir has been a regular fixture at contentious gatherings of Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem, and Israel's police chief blamed him for provoking major May 2021 Israeli-Palestinian violence there.¹⁶

Jared Gans, "Five ways Netanyahu's return could shake up Israel and the world," *The Hill*, November 3, 2022.

⁶ David Horovitz, "With rise of Ben Gvir and Smotrich, Israel risks a catastrophic lurch to extremism," *Times of Israel*, October 27, 2022.

⁷ Hagar Shezaf, "Religious Zionism Will Seek Portfolios with Most Control over West Bank," *Haaretz*, November 6, 2022.

⁸ Jeremy Sharon, "After strong showing, Religious Zionism says High Court override bill a top priority," *Times of Israel*, November 2, 2022.

⁹ Dov Lieber and Aaron Boxerman, "Israeli Lawmakers Aim to Remake Court," *Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2022.

¹⁰ Judah Ari Gross, "Israel poised to have its most religious government; experts say no theocracy yet," *Times of Israel*, November 4, 2022.

¹¹ Ibid; "Slapping down far-right partners, Netanyahu vows no change to LGBT status quo," *Times of Israel*, November 4, 2022.

¹² Adam Lucente, "Explainer: Kahanism, far-right ideology linked to Netanyahu's election win," *Al-Monitor*, November 2, 2022.

¹³ State Department, "Revocation of Five Foreign Terrorist Organizations Designations and the Delisting of Six Deceased Individuals as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," May 20, 2022.

¹⁴ Etgar Lefkovits, "Ben-Gvir convicted of inciting to racism," *Jerusalem Post*, June 25, 2007.

¹⁵ Lucente, "Explainer: Kahanism, far-right ideology linked to Netanyahu's election win."

¹⁶ Gregoire Sauvage, "Itamar Ben Gvir, the ultra-nationalist accused of stirring up violence in Jerusalem," *France24*, May 15, 2021.

Netanyahu may feel some inclination to accommodate demands from Smotrich and Ben Gvir to serve in the cabinet and pass legislation because Religious Zionism might support legal measures that could retroactively bar corruption charges against serving prime ministers.¹⁷ Yet, Religious Zionism's political leverage over Netanyahu might be limited because (1) some other Netanyahu supporters may oppose blocking the trial, and (2) Netanyahu may expect a trial outcome or plea bargain that allows him to remain in power.¹⁸ To date, Netanyahu has said that he will not allow legislation to influence his trial.¹⁹ Ben Gvir has publicly asked to become public security minister, which would give him responsibility for policing Israeli cities and Jerusalem's sensitive holy sites.²⁰ Despite his 2021 criticism of Ben Gvir, Israel's police chief has said that he could work with him.²¹

Perhaps anticipating Arab and international concerns about Religious Zionism leaders having responsibility for sensitive issues regarding the Palestinians, Netanyahu has pledged to maintain the historic "status quo" that allows only Muslims to worship at the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif ("Mount/Haram") in Jerusalem's Old City.²² Jordanian officials have warned that any change to the status quo or provocative Ben Gvir visits to the Mount/Haram would harm Israel-Jordan ties.²³ With Israeli-Palestinian violence in the West Bank at a point arguably higher than any time since the second Palestinian intifada (2000-2005), U.S. officials have increased efforts in late 2022 to encourage de-escalation and greater Israel-Palestinian Authority security coordination alongside socioeconomic initiatives to help Palestinians (as discussed below).

Initial U.S. Responses

Reportedly, U.S. officials plan to work with the new Israeli government, but may have a problem working with Ben Gvir because of "his party's racist rhetoric and positions against Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the Arab minority in Israel."²⁴ Before the election, a Member of Congress reportedly warned Netanyahu that a government including Religious Zionism leaders could undermine U.S.-Israel relations,²⁵ and another Member tweeted similar concerns.²⁶ Netanyahu has said that he refuses to allow U.S. lawmakers to dictate who can be

¹⁷ "Ben Gvir says he'll demand law that will cancel Netanyahu's corruption trial," *Times of Israel*, October 30, 2022; Lieber and Boxerman, "Israeli Lawmakers Aim to Remake Court"; Amos Harel, "Israel Elections: With the West Bank on the Brink, Netanyahu Ushers in the Pyromaniacs," *Haaretz*, November 4, 2022.

¹⁸ Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Israel Elections: How is the vote impacting Netanyahu's trial? – analysis," *Jerusalem Post*, November 1, 2022.

¹⁹ Lieber and Boxerman, "Israeli Lawmakers Aim to Remake Court."

²⁰ Shalom Yerushalmi, "Netanyahu may have no choice but to give Ben Gvir the Public Security Ministry," *Times of Israel*, November 7, 2022.

²¹ "Police chief says he'll work with Ben Gvir, whom he reportedly blamed for 2021 riots," *Times of Israel*, November 8, 2022.

²² Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Netanyahu says Ben Gvir could be police minister, vows to 'neutralize' Lebanon deal," *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2022. For background on the status quo, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti; and CRS Report RL33546, *Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

²³ "Jordan said to warn incoming government against touching Temple Mount status quo," *Times of Israel*, November 7, 2022. See also Jeremy Sharon, "Fire on the Mount?" *Times of Israel*, November 8, 2022.

²⁴ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: U.S. unlikely to work with Jewish supremacist expected to be made Israeli minister," *Axios*, November 2, 2022.

²⁵ Barak Ravid and Alayna Treene, "Scoop: Menendez warns Netanyahu against working with Jewish supremacists," *Axios*, October 1, 2022.

²⁶ Twitter, Congressman Brad Sherman, 7:05 PM, October 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/bradsherman/status/1577072440731000833>.

included in Israel's government.²⁷ Yet, Netanyahu has reportedly cited U.S. concerns in resisting Smotrich's demand to become defense minister to date.²⁸ On November 2, the State Department spokesperson said that "we hope that all Israeli Government officials will continue to share the values of an open, democratic society, including tolerance and respect for all in civil society, particularly for minority groups."²⁹ On November 7, President Biden called to congratulate Netanyahu on his party's victory, commending Israel's free and fair elections, underscoring his "unwavering support" for Israel's security, and reaffirming that the strong U.S.-Israel partnership is based on "shared democratic values and mutual interests."³⁰

Two former U.S. officials have written that if a new Israeli government with Smotrich and Ben Gvir features open hostility to Arabs and illiberal measures to change Israel's democracy, opponents of strong U.S.-Israel relations will exploit the situation "to try to undo aspects of the relationship, and certainly to challenge Israeli military requests."³¹ U.S. Ambassador to Israel Thomas Nides has said that he plans to work closely with the next prime minister, but would push back on areas of disagreement with the new government, including if it were to move toward West Bank annexation, but also said that he did not expect such a move.³² Some speculation that Netanyahu might engage in coalition talks with Yesh Atid and the National Unity list (headed by current Defense Minister Benny Gantz)—as a possible alternative to a government with Religious Zionism—has been denied to date by all three parties.³³

Israeli-Palestinian Issues³⁴

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.³⁵ 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 terrorist attacks and incitement to violence against Israelis, settlement expansion and settler violence against Palestinians, Israeli demolitions and evictions affecting Palestinians, and Palestine Liberation Organization/Palestinian Authority (PA) payments for individuals imprisoned for acts

²⁷ "Netanyahu: 'Won't bow my head' to US lawmakers' warning against Ben Gvir partnership," *Times of Israel*, October 25, 2022.

²⁸ Tobias Siegal, "Netanyahu said to tell Smotrich he won't get defense job, because of US objections," *Times of Israel*, November 16, 2022.

²⁹ State Department Press Briefing, November 2, 2022.

³⁰ White House, "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.'s Call with Former Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu," November 7, 2022.

³¹ Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, "A narrow government with Ben Gvir and Smotrich threatens US-Israel ties," *Times of Israel*, November 2, 2022.

³² Amy Spiro, "US envoy says White House 'will fight' any Israeli West Bank annexation efforts," *Times of Israel*, November 10, 2022.

³³ Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Likud, Lapid and Gantz deny report that they're in unity government talks," *Times of Israel*, November 16, 2022.

³⁴ See also CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

³⁵ White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority in Joint Press Statement | Bethlehem, West Bank," July 15, 2022.

of terrorism.³⁶ Biden Administration officials have renewed diplomatic ties with West Bank-based PA President Mahmoud Abbas and resumed various forms of U.S. aid for Palestinians.³⁷

The Trump Administration and U.S. Policy on Jerusalem

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.³⁸

Some Israeli settlement construction plans for East Jerusalem and the West Bank have advanced,³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ In May 2022, Israel advanced plans for nearly 4,500 additional housing units for West Bank settlements,⁴¹ drawing statements of strong opposition from the Administration.⁴²

Israel has taken some steps to improve Palestinians' economic and living circumstances, including through loans and work permits.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

³⁶ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Middle East," September 28, 2022; State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett After Their Meeting," Jerusalem, March 27, 2022.

³⁷ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

³⁸ Niels Lesniewski, "White House confirms Biden will keep embassy in Jerusalem," *Roll Call*, February 9, 2021.

³⁹ Nir Hasson, "Israel Presses Forward with Plan to Expand West Bank Settlement Near Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, September 12, 2022; Jeremy Sharon, "Israel advances plan for controversial Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem," *Times of Israel*, September 5, 2022; Hagar Shezaf, "Israel Advances Thousands of Settlement Homes Despite Harsh U.S. Rebuke," *haaretz.com*, October 27, 2021.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Sharon, "Hearing on controversial E1 settlement plan postponed again," *Times of Israel*, September 8, 2022; "Israel stops plan for contentious east Jerusalem settlement," *Associated Press*, December 6, 2021.

⁴¹ Hagar Shezaf, "Israel Advances over 4,000 West Bank Housing Units for Jews," *Haaretz*, May 12, 2022.

⁴² State Department Press Briefing, May 6, 2022.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Neri Zilber, "Israel's new plan is to 'shrink,' not solve, the Palestinian conflict," *CNN*, September 16, 2021.

⁴⁵ White House, "FACT SHEET: The United States-Palestinian Relationship," July 14, 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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 2014.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

Israel-West Bank Violence

To date in 2022, Israeli-Palestinian violence has resulted in the deaths of at least 19 Israelis or foreigners in Israel and around 140 Palestinians in the West Bank (see text box below on the death of U.S. citizen Shireen Abu Akleh).⁵² Israeli forces have concentrated many counterterrorism efforts on northern West Bank cities like Nablus and Jenin in connection with efforts to arrest terrorism suspects, halt illicit weapons smuggling and production, and establish order.⁵³

With prospects apparently 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).

In September 2022 remarks before the U.N. Security Council, U.S. Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield lamented unilateral actions opposed to peace, saying that they include “terrorist attacks and incitement to violence against Israelis” and “violence inflicted by Israeli settlers on Palestinians in their neighborhoods, and in some cases escorted by Israeli

⁴⁶ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ David Makovsky, “Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 25, 2021.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Aaron Boxerman, “UN to begin dispensing Qatari cash to needy Gazan families Monday under new deal,” *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021.

⁵¹ Yaniv Kubovich, “Egypt, Qatar Reach Breakthrough on Hamas Civil Servants Salaries,” *haaretz.com*, November 29, 2021; Abu Amer, “Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas.”

⁵² Isabel Kershner, “Palestinian Assailant Kills Three Israelis in the West Bank,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2022.

⁵³ Ibid.

Security Forces.”⁵⁴ The same day, the State Department spokesperson said, “The United States and other international partners stand ready to help but we cannot substitute for vital actions by the parties to mitigate conflict and to restore calm.”⁵⁵ In a September 2022 phone briefing, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said that U.S. officials seek to ensure that Israel-PA “security cooperation is robust and continuing,” while also encouraging an improvement in economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza “because those can help and sustain improvement in security conditions.”⁵⁶

As the increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence has attracted greater U.S. policy attention,⁵⁷ Israeli and PA forces have approached West Bank militants in different ways, leading to some tensions and the possibility of future escalation.⁵⁸ The PA reportedly seeks time and flexibility to address militancy independent of Israeli dictates, with efforts to reach compromises that avoid major armed confrontations or arrests. Some PA personnel reportedly have directly targeted Israeli forces or settlers, raising questions about the PA’s ability to control individuals’ actions.⁵⁹

Shireen Abu Akleh Killing and Controversy

In May 2022, prominent *Al Jazeera* journalist Shireen Abu Akleh (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.”⁶⁰ Evidence suggests that the shot may have come from Israeli forces,⁶¹ with the PA asserting that its investigation proves Israeli forces deliberately targeted Abu Akleh, but Israel denying any such intent.⁶² In April 2022, some advocacy groups and lawyers filed a complaint with the ICC alleging that Israel has systematically targeted Palestinian journalists for years.⁶³

After some Members of the House and Senate sent letters to the executive branch requesting that the State Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) conduct an independent investigation into Abu Akleh’s death,⁶⁴ 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

⁵⁴ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, “Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Middle East,” September 28, 2022.

⁵⁵ State Department Press Briefing, September 28, 2022.

⁵⁶ State Department, “Special Briefing with Ambassador Barbara Leaf, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs,” September 14, 2022.

⁵⁷ State Department Press Briefings, October 25, 2022, and September 28, 2022; “Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield,” September 28, 2022. See also CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁵⁸ Isabel Kershner, “Israeli Military Targets New Palestinian Militia,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2022; Yaniv Kubovich and Jack Houry, “Nablus’ ‘Lion’s Den’ Has Become a Major Headache for Israel and the Palestinian Authority,” *Haaretz*, October 12, 2022.

⁵⁹ Ahmad Melhem, “Palestinian security forces become more involved in resistance in West Bank,” *Al-Monitor*, October 12, 2022.

⁶⁰ State Department Press Briefing, May 11, 2022.

⁶¹ Josef Federman, “Bellingcat probe suggests Israeli fire most likely killed journalist; but not 100%,” *Associated Press*, May 16, 2022.

⁶² “Palestinian officials: Israel killed Al Jazeera reporter,” *Associated Press*, May 26, 2022.

⁶³ International Federation of Journalists, “Palestine: ICC case filed over systematic targeting of Palestinian journalists,” April 26, 2022.

⁶⁴ 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).

intentional.”⁶⁵ PA officials and members of Abu Akleh’s family have publicly criticized the part of the USSC’s finding regarding intent.⁶⁶ A June 2022 public opinion poll indicated that 92% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza believe that Abu Akleh was deliberately targeted.⁶⁷

After conducting an internal investigation, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said in September 2022 that there was a “high possibility” that Abu Akleh was accidentally hit by IDF gunfire⁶⁸—eliciting additional public criticism from PA officials and Abu Akleh family members who assert that the shooting was not accidental.⁶⁹ In response, the State Department welcomed the IDF review,⁷⁰ later adding that U.S. officials would continue to press Israel to “closely review its policies and practices on rules of engagement and consider additional steps to mitigate the risk of civilian harm, protect journalists, and prevent similar tragedies in the future.”⁷¹ Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid and Defense Minister Benny Gantz then defended Israel’s rules of engagement and said that no outside party could dictate them.⁷²

In November 2022, media reports said that the FBI has opened an investigation into Abu Akleh’s death.⁷³ In response, Defense Minister Gantz said that the alleged U.S. decision was a mistake and that Israel, after having conducted an “independent and professional investigation,” would not cooperate with an external investigation.⁷⁴

To accompany the Senate Appropriations Committee July 2022 markup of the 2023 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act (S. 4662), the explanatory statement would require a report from the Secretary of State on steps taken to facilitate an independent, credible, and transparent investigation into Abu Akleh’s death, including whether 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (also known as the Leahy Law, pertaining to the possibility of gross human rights violations by a foreign security force unit) applies.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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

⁶⁵ State Department press statement, “On the Killing of Shireen Abu Akleh,” July 4, 2022.

⁶⁶ “US: Israeli fire likely killed reporter; no final conclusion,” *Associated Press*, July 4, 2022.

⁶⁷ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Public Opinion Poll No. 84, June 22-25, 2022.

⁶⁸ Hiba Yazbek and Patrick Kingsley, “Israel Says Reporter Was Probably Shot By One of Its Forces,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2022.

⁶⁹ Khaled Abu Toameh, “Palestinians reject IDF probe into Shireen Abu Akleh killing, vow to bring case to ICC,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 5, 2022.

⁷⁰ State Department, “IDF Releases Shireen Abu Akleh Report,” September 5, 2022.

⁷¹ State Department Press Briefing, September 6, 2022.

⁷² Emanuel Fabian and Jacob Magid, “Rebuffing US, Lapid and Gantz say ‘no one will dictate’ IDF’s open-fire regulations,” *Times of Israel*, September 7, 2022.

⁷³ Barak Ravid, “FBI opens investigation into killing of Palestinian American Shireen Abu Akleh,” *Axios*, November 14, 2022.

⁷⁴ Laura Kelly, “Israel calls US probe into journalist’s death ‘grave mistake,’ says it ‘will not cooperate,’” *The Hill*, November 14, 2022.

⁷⁵ For background on the Leahy Law, see CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

⁷⁶ 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.

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.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ One exception is that implementing Israel-Sudan normalization appears to be on hold following the Sudanese military's seizure of power in October 2021.⁷⁹ 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.”⁸⁰ However, the Biden Administration’s willingness to offer major U.S. policy inducements to countries in connection with normalization efforts remains unclear.⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ In October 2022, the UAE’s foreign minister reportedly warned Benjamin Netanyahu that including leaders from the Religious Zionism list in a new Israeli government could harm Israel-UAE ties and the Abraham Accords.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ Israel had previously been under the purview of U.S. European Command. CENTCOM formalized Israel’s move in September 2021,⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Jake Sullivan discussed Saudi-Israel normalization with MBS,” *Axios*, October 20, 2021.

⁷⁸ “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.

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ 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.

⁸¹ Michael Koplow et al., “Biden has an opportunity to put his own stamp on Arab-Israeli relations,” *The Hill*, October 14, 2021.

⁸² State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Joint Press Statements at the Conclusion of the Negev Summit,” March 28, 2022.

⁸³ Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, “Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal,” *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

⁸⁴ Jacob Magid, “UAE warns Netanyahu against government with Ben Gvir and Smotrich,” *Times of Israel*, October 26, 2022.

⁸⁵ Jared Szuba, “Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift,” *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2021.

⁸⁶ U.S. Central Command, “U.S. Central Command Statement on the Realignment of the State of Israel,” September 1,

and in October an Israeli Defense Forces liaison was stationed at CENTCOM headquarters.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹ Earlier, both Morocco (November 2021) and Bahrain (February 2022) signed MOUs with Israel on security cooperation.⁹⁰ These MOUs appear to anticipate more intelligence sharing, joint exercises and training, and arms sales. Reports in fall 2022 indicate that Israel has agreed to sell air defense systems to all three countries, and may be contemplating more defense and defense technology sales.⁹¹ Israel's defense ministry has estimated that deals to date with the three countries are worth \$3 billion.⁹²

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.⁹³ Speculation about specific measures has continued since then.⁹⁴

Reports 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."⁹⁵ One obstacle could be the apparent reluctance of countries in the region to share the real-time intelligence data that underlies basic threat information that they might be more willing to share.⁹⁶ Unless and until a regional framework is formalized, CENTCOM apparently plans to help coordinate air defense and response with various U.S. regional partners using the X-band radar

2021.

⁸⁷ Judah Ari Gross, "IDF liaison sets up shop in US CENTCOM offices in Florida, solidifying move," *The Times of Israel*, October 29, 2021.

⁸⁸ "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>.

⁸⁹ Arie Egozi, "Amid attacks, UAE quietly asks Israel about defense systems: Sources," *Breaking Defense*, January 25, 2022.

⁹⁰ 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.

⁹¹ Arie Egozi, "First Israeli Barak air defense system deploys to UAE, bigger deals expected: Sources," *Breaking Defense*, October 19, 2022; Dion Nissenbaum, "Accords Benefit Israel's Defense Industry," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2022.

⁹² Nissenbaum, "Accords Benefit Israel's Defense Industry."

⁹³ "Israel reportedly working on air defense pact with regional allies," *Times of Israel*, March 29, 2022.

⁹⁴ Arie Egozi, "Gulf States Willing to Host Israeli Sensors for Air-Defense Network: Sources," *Breaking Defense*, June 29, 2022; "Israel to ask Biden for okay to provide air defense laser to Saudi Arabia – report," *Times of Israel*, June 28, 2022; Patrick Kingsley and Ronen Bergman, "Israel Grows Military Role with Alliance Against Iran," *New York Times*, June 21, 2022.

⁹⁵ 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.

⁹⁶ Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, "Biden wants a Middle East air defense 'alliance.' But it's a long way off," *Politico*, July 12, 2022.

stationed in Israel, ship-borne Aegis combat systems, and existing air defense systems and fighter jets.⁹⁷

Selected congressional actions. In January 2022, some Members of the Senate and House formed bipartisan caucuses to promote the Abraham Accords.⁹⁸ 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 in the House version (H.R. 7900) and as amendments to the 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 coordinated drone and missile attacks have implications for Israeli security calculations.⁹⁹ 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."¹⁰⁰

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.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Anshel Pfeffer, "How Israel and Saudi Arabia Plan to Down Iranian Drones Together," *Haaretz*, July 13, 2022.

⁹⁸ For more information, see <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Senate%20Abraham%20Accords%20Caucus%20Mission%20Statement.pdf>.

⁹⁹ 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?" *Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Seth J. Frantzman, "Iran and Hezbollah analyze Israel's 'war between the wars,'" *Jerusalem Post*, November 14, 2021.

¹⁰¹ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Iran Nears an Atomic Milestone," *New York Times*, September 13, 2021.

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.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

As the Biden Administration has engaged in international diplomacy and considered the possibility of reentering or revising the JCPOA, Israeli leaders have sought 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.¹⁰⁴ 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.”¹⁰⁵ During their stints as prime minister, Bennett and Yair Lapid have opposed the deal, but largely abstained from involvement in U.S. debates on the issue.¹⁰⁶

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.”¹⁰⁷ 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.”¹⁰⁸ Additionally, Biden said that he would be willing to use force against Iran as a “last resort” to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ As of November 2022, prospects for a renewed or revised JCPOA appear uncertain.¹¹¹

Various sources document reported Israeli covert or military operations targeting Iran’s nuclear program,¹¹² and some U.S. officials have reportedly differed with Israeli counterparts on the

¹⁰² 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.

¹⁰³ Dion Nissenbaum et al., “Israel Widens Covert Actions to Rein in Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ 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.

¹⁰⁵ 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.

¹⁰⁶ “Bennett says he won’t pick public fight with US over Iran nuclear deal,” *Times of Israel*, March 21, 2022; Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Lapid’s Remarks at the Start of the Weekly Cabinet Meeting,” July 17, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ White House, “The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration,” July 14, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Lahav Harkov, “Biden says US won’t wait forever for Iran deal, doesn’t set deadline,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 14, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ “Biden delivers tough talk on Iran as he opens Mideast visit.”

¹¹⁰ “Lapid: Israel, US don’t ‘necessarily agree’ on need for military threat against Iran,” *Times of Israel*, July 17, 2022.

¹¹¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The dimming prospects of returning to a nuclear agreement with Iran,” November 2022.

¹¹² “Iran foils Israel-linked ‘sabotage’ plot at nuclear plant,” *Agence France Presse*, March 15, 2022.

overall effectiveness of such operations.¹¹³ Even with reported upgrades to Israeli military capabilities,¹¹⁴ questions apparently remain about military readiness for a major operation against Iran's nuclear program.¹¹⁵

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.¹¹⁶ Speculation persists about the potential for wider conflict and its implications, including from incursions into Israeli airspace by Hezbollah drones.¹¹⁷

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.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹

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.¹²⁰

Russia has reportedly shown some capacity to thwart Israeli airstrikes against Iranian or Syrian targets,¹²¹ but has generally refrained via a deconfliction mechanism with Israel.¹²² This deconfliction has apparently continued to date even with Russia's war on Ukraine, but Russia has criticized some Israeli strikes.¹²³ 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

¹¹³ David E. Sanger et al., "Israeli Attacks Spur Upgrade of Iran Sites," *New York Times*, November 22, 2021.

¹¹⁴ "Israel makes dramatic upgrades to military plans to attack Iran," *Jerusalem Post* (citing Walla!), June 8, 2022.

¹¹⁵ Yossi Melman, "Israel Has No Realistic Military Option on Iran," *Haaretz*, September 1, 2022.

¹¹⁶ CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud; CRS In Focus IF10703, *Lebanese Hezbollah*, by Carla E. Humud.

¹¹⁷ Orna Mizrahi and Yoram Schweitzer, "Hezbollah's Efforts to Restore its Domestic Standing: The Israeli Card," Institute for National Security Studies, March 9, 2022.

¹¹⁸ 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.

¹¹⁹ "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.

¹²⁰ Anna Ahronheim, "Thousands of airstrikes carried out by Israel in past five years," *jpost.com*, March 29, 2022.

¹²¹ Arie Egozi, "Israel Shifts to Standoff Weapons in Syria as Russian Threats Increase," *Breaking Defense*, July 27, 2021.

¹²² Jacob Magid, "Russia says military coordination with Israel in Syria will continue as usual," *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2022.

¹²³ 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.

deconfliction.¹²⁴ In August, a private Israeli company published images indicating that Russia has since taken the S-300 back to Russia as part of its Ukraine-related military efforts.¹²⁵

In October 2022, Israel, Lebanon, and the United States resolved a longstanding maritime boundary dispute, with potential implications for Israel-Hezbollah conflict (see **Appendix C**). Public debate in Israel centers on whether the economic benefits from the deal are worth the concessions and the possible emboldening of Hezbollah.¹²⁶ As he prepares to return to power, Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to “neutralize” the maritime boundary agreement,¹²⁷ though his past efforts as prime minister to secure a similar Israel-Lebanon deal suggest that any rhetorical opposition may be an effort to placate his political base rather than a serious threat to the agreement’s implementation.¹²⁸

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.¹²⁹ As mentioned above regarding Syria, 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.¹³⁰

Despite entreaties from Ukrainian officials, Israel has refrained to date from directly providing lethal assistance to Ukraine.¹³¹ Starting in May 2022, Israel has sent some protective gear to Ukrainian rescue forces and civilian organizations.¹³² Additionally, an Israeli media outlet reported in September that an Israeli company is in the process of supplying anti-drone systems to Poland, and that Poland is then able to sell the systems to Ukraine.¹³³

With Russia apparently using Iran-made drones in Ukraine, Israel has reportedly begun sharing basic intelligence with Ukraine aimed at helping it counter these drones.¹³⁴ Defense Minister

¹²⁴ 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.

¹²⁵ Emanuel Fabian, “Russia sends S-300 back home from Syria amid Ukraine invasion, satellite images show,” *Times of Israel*, August 26, 2022.

¹²⁶ Isabel Kershner, “Israel and Lebanon Sign Deal on Maritime Border,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2022.

¹²⁷ Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Netanyahu says Ben Gvir could be police minister, vows to ‘neutralize’ Lebanon deal,” *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2022.

¹²⁸ Shlomo Maital, “The Lebanon-Israel gas deal: A lifeline for Beirut,” *Jerusalem Report*, November 7, 2022; Ben Caspit, “Will Israel’s Netanyahu upend Lebanon gas deal, Iran policy?” *Al-Monitor*, November 2, 2022.

¹²⁹ 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.

¹³⁰ Zev Chafets, “Why Israel Won’t Supply the Iron Dome to Ukraine,” *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2022.

¹³¹ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Israel rejects U.S. request to approve missile transfer to Ukraine,” *Axios*, May 25, 2022.

¹³² “Zelensky ‘shocked’ by lack of Israeli defense support: ‘They gave us nothing,’” *Times of Israel*, September 23, 2022; “In first, Israel sends 2,000 helmets, 500 flak jackets to Ukraine,” *Times of Israel*, May 18, 2022.

¹³³ Tani Goldstein, “Israeli defense firm selling anti-drone systems to Ukraine by way of Poland,” *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2022.

¹³⁴ “Israel giving intel on Russia’s Iranian drones to Ukraine – report,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 24, 2022.

Gantz has said that Israel might provide Ukraine with early warning systems, but not weapons systems.¹³⁵

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.¹³⁶ Observers debate the influence of prominent Russian or Russian-speaking Israelis within Israel.¹³⁷ 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.”¹³⁸

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 on Ukraine and possibly Syria and Jerusalem may be motivating the pending legal action.¹³⁹ Prime Minister Lapid has warned Russia that closing the agency’s Russian branch would be a “grave event” with consequences for Israel-Russia relations.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Emanuel Fabian, “Gantz: Israel may supply Ukraine with rocket and drone alert system, but not weapons,” *Times of Israel*, October 19, 2022.

¹³⁶ Rina Bassist, “Israel vows country won’t become safe haven for sanctioned Russian oligarchs,” *Al-Monitor*, March 14, 2022.

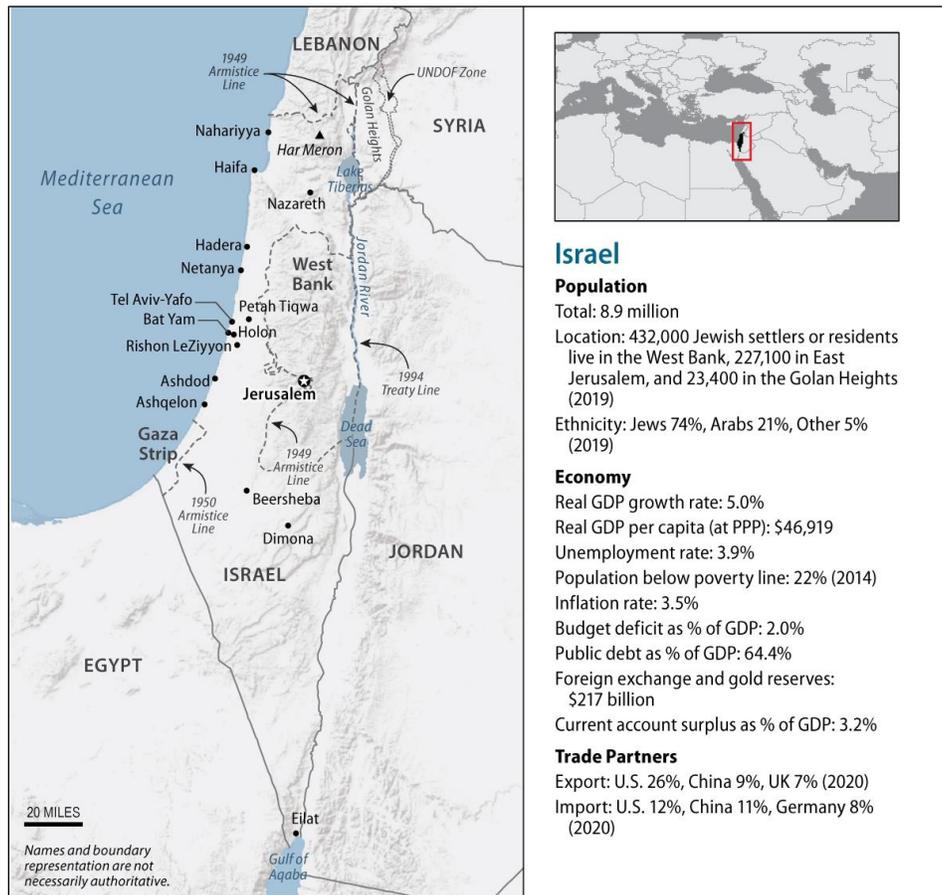
¹³⁷ Patrick Kingsley, “Israel’s Cautious Tone on Ukraine Puts Focus on Israeli Oligarchs,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2022.

¹³⁸ “US official warns Israel: ‘Don’t be last haven for dirty money fueling Putin’s war,’” *Times of Israel*, March 11, 2022.

¹³⁹ Anton Troianovski and Isabel Kershner, “Russia Moves to Shut Down Agency Handling Emigration to Israel,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ 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. 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>.

Appendix B. Main Israeli Parties and Their Leaders

RIGHT



Likud (Consolidation)

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.



National Unity (HaMachane HaMamlachti)

Merger of centrist Blue and White (led by Benny Gantz) and right-of-center New Hope (led by Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar) parties. Has sought to present a contrast to the Netanyahu-led Likud by claiming support for long-standing Israeli institutions such as the judiciary and for an inclusive vision of Israeli nationalism for Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. Also includes former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot. Varying views on Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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.



Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home)

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

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 Beitenu as a platform for former Soviet immigrants. He was acquitted of corruption allegations in a 2013 case.



Religious Zionism (HaTzionut HaDatit)

Grouping of right-of-center parties including Religious Zionism/National Union-Tkuma, Otzma Yehudit, and Noam.

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. He served as transportation minister during a transitional period from 2019 to 2020.

LEFT



Labor (Avoda)

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.

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.

CENTER



Yesh Atid (There Is a Future)

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.

Leader: Prime Minister Yair Lapid

Born in 1963, Lapid transitioned from a successful media career to politics in 2013, when he founded Yesh Atid. 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 has stated support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 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.

ULTRA-ORTHODOX



Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians)

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.



United Torah Judaism

Ashkenazi Haredi coalition (Agudat Yisrael and Degel HaTorah); 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: Yitzhak Goldknopf

Born in 1951, Goldknopf is prominent in the ultra-Orthodox community as an operator of kindergartens and day care centers, and as an advocate for legal measures to enforce Sabbath observance. The 2022 election is his first for the Knesset.

ARAB



Hadash-Ta'al

Electoral slate featuring two Arab parties that combine socialist and Arab nationalist political strains: Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) and Ta'al (Arab Movement for Renewal).

Leader: Ayman Odeh

Born in 1975, Odeh is the leader of Hadash, an Arab Israeli socialist party, along with the overall Hadash-Ta'al slate. An attorney, he served on the Haifa city council before becoming Hadash’s national leader in 2006.



United Arab List (UAL or Ra'am)

Islamist Arab party that embodies conservative social values while seeking state support to improve Arabs’ socioeconomic position within Israel.

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.

Appendix C. Israel-Lebanon Maritime Agreement

Despite the lack of formal Israel-Lebanon relations, on October 11, 2022, Israel, Lebanon and the United States announced that they had reached an agreement to settle a longstanding Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary dispute. The agreement paves the way for both countries to eventually increase offshore gas production. The deal also recognizes an existing 5 km buoy line extending into the Mediterranean as the status quo pending a formal future Israel-Lebanon agreement (see **Figure C-1**). According to a senior Biden Administration official:

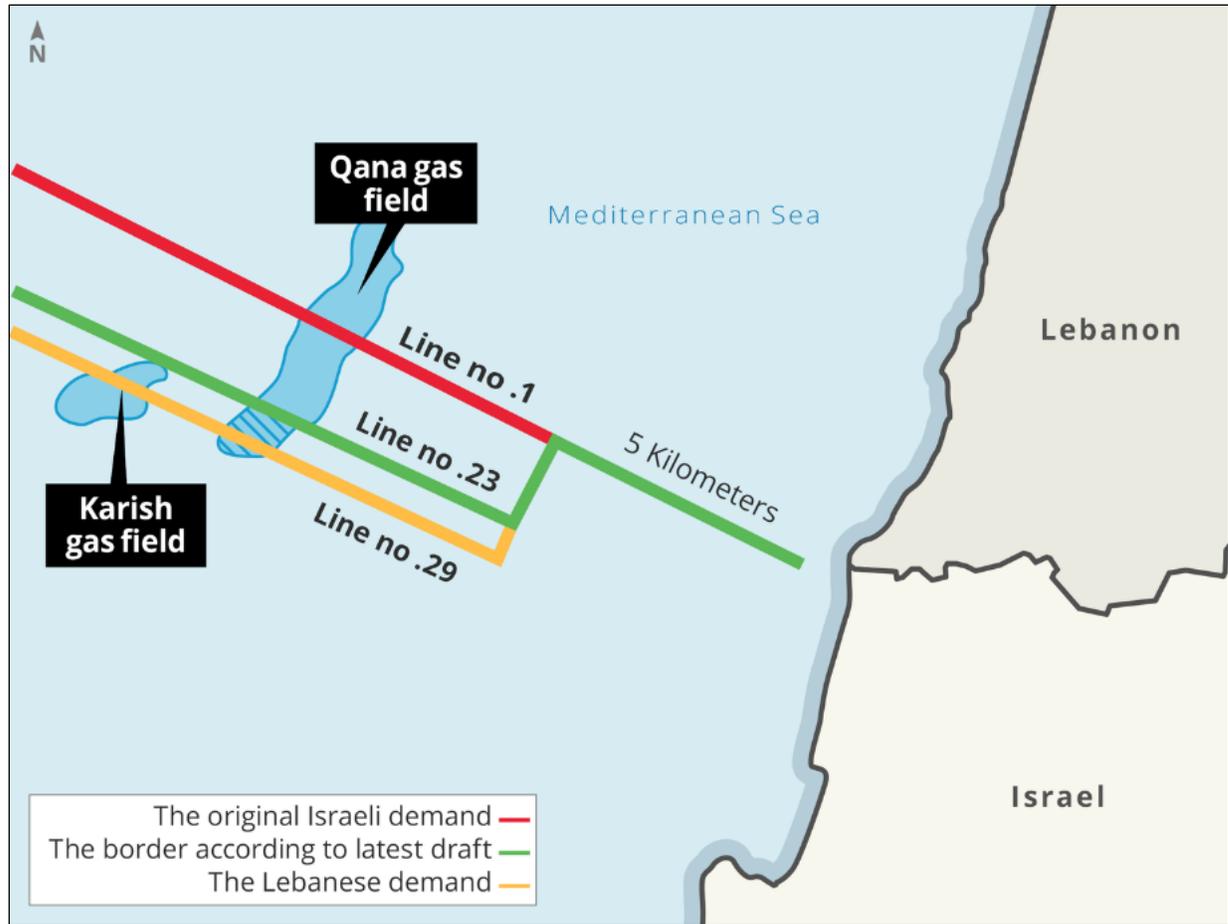
This is not a direct bilateral agreement. It is through the United States. But it is marking a boundary that will allow both countries to pursue their economic interests without conflict.¹⁴¹

On October 27, the parties signed documents to begin implementation of the deal.¹⁴² Reportedly, President Biden has drafted a letter to Israel guaranteeing Israel's security and economic rights in the agreement and pledging to prevent Hezbollah from receiving any income from Lebanese natural gas drilling.¹⁴³ Implementation may hinge in part on domestic political outcomes connected with Israel's November 1 election and subsequent government formation process.

¹⁴¹ White House, "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on the Israel-Lebanon Maritime Agreement," October 11, 2022.

¹⁴² Lazar Berman, "Biden drafts letter guaranteeing Israel's rights in Lebanon maritime deal," *Times of Israel*, October 29, 2022.

¹⁴³ Jonathan Lis, "Lebanon Maritime Deal: U.S. Offers Guarantees if Hezbollah 'Challenges the Agreement,'" *Haaretz*, October 11, 2022; Lahav Harkov, "What is in the Israel-Lebanon maritime border agreement?" *Jerusalem Post*, October 11, 2022.

Figure C-1. Map: Israel-Lebanon Maritime Boundary Agreement

Source: Haaretz.

Note: All boundaries are approximate.

Under the agreement, Lebanon has full rights to the Qana gas field—with the caveat that a future side agreement between Israel and Lebanon’s Block 9 operator (the French company Total) will settle any revenues granted to Israel in the case of gas production in the section of the Qana field that falls into Israel’s Block 72. It is only after this side agreement that initial exploration can begin at Qana, with regular extraction likely beginning several years after that.¹⁴⁴

The terms of the deal leave the Karish gas field—from which Israel started extracting gas shortly before the deal’s signing—completely within Israel’s exclusive economic zone. Hezbollah had threatened attacks against Israel if extraction at Karish began before resolving the dispute.

As mentioned above, public debate in Israel centers on whether the economic benefits from the deal are worth the concessions and the possible emboldening of Hezbollah.¹⁴⁵ As he prepares to return to power, Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to “neutralize” the maritime boundary agreement,¹⁴⁶ though his past efforts as prime minister to secure a similar Israel-Lebanon deal

¹⁴⁴ Lazar Berman, “Israeli official: Development of disputed Qana gas field will take four stages,” *Times of Israel*, October 12, 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Isabel Kershner, “Israel and Lebanon Sign Deal on Maritime Border,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Netanyahu says Ben Gvir could be police minister, vows to ‘neutralize’ Lebanon deal,” *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2022.

suggest that any rhetorical opposition may be an effort to placate his political base rather than a serious threat to the agreement's implementation.¹⁴⁷

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¹⁴⁷ Shlomo Maital, "The Lebanon-Israel gas deal: A lifeline for Beirut," *Jerusalem Report*, November 7, 2022; Ben Caspit, "Will Israel's Netanyahu upend Lebanon gas deal, Iran policy?" *Al-Monitor*, November 2, 2022.