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Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations

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Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations

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:

Netanyahu government and judicial reform debate. In December 2022, Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister of a new government, despite facing an ongoing criminal trial for corruption. Netanyahu's inclusion of ultra-nationalists Bezael Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir within the new Israeli government has triggered debate about the consequences for Israel's democracy, its ability to manage tensions with Palestinians, and its relations with the United States. The government has proposed legislation to overhaul Israel's judicial system, triggering a highly charged national debate over checks and balances in Israel with potential international implications. With President Biden and some Members of Congress encouraging a compromise solution, and broad domestic disagreement over the issue, Netanyahu's government temporarily postponed the legislation in March 2023. As compromise efforts stalled in June, the government began moving forward on one element of the proposal.

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, legalization of outposts, demolitions and evictions, disruptions to the historic status quo of the holy sites, and incitement and acquiescence to violence. Since 2022, Israeli-Palestinian violence has triggered heightened West Bank counterterrorism measures, with another spike in early 2023 leading the Palestinian Authority to announce the suspension of security coordination with Israel. The United States, Jordan, and Egypt have convened periodic talks aimed at bolstering Israel-PA coordination, de-escalating tensions, and minimizing unilateral measures. As the Gaza Strip remains 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 possible Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia. 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. Ongoing efforts to deepen security and economic ties between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco could drive broader regional cooperation—including on various types of defense. After China helped broker diplomatic normalization between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Administration has declared that Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia is a U.S. priority. Any negotiations toward that end would likely consider Saudi security and civilian nuclear demands, as well as a pathway toward a two-state solution. Congress has passed 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. Israeli leaders seek greater international pressure on Iran amid questions about the tenor of U.S.-Israel cooperation on Iran-related issues. Israel also has reportedly conducted a number of covert or military operations against Iran and its allies in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq for various purposes, including to prevent Lebanese Hezbollah from bolstering its weapons arsenal and capabilities. Some reports suggest the future possibility of an informal, unwritten U.S.-Iran understanding by which Iran might limit some uranium enrichment and receive some financial relief for humanitarian purposes, raising questions about how Israel might respond to such a deal.

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. Israel has shown reluctance to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine—citing the need to deconflict its military operations over Syria with Russia. However, Israel is reportedly providing or planning to provide basic intelligence, assistance with early warning systems, and anti-drone jamming systems to counter Iran-made drones and missiles used by Russia.

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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 the following:

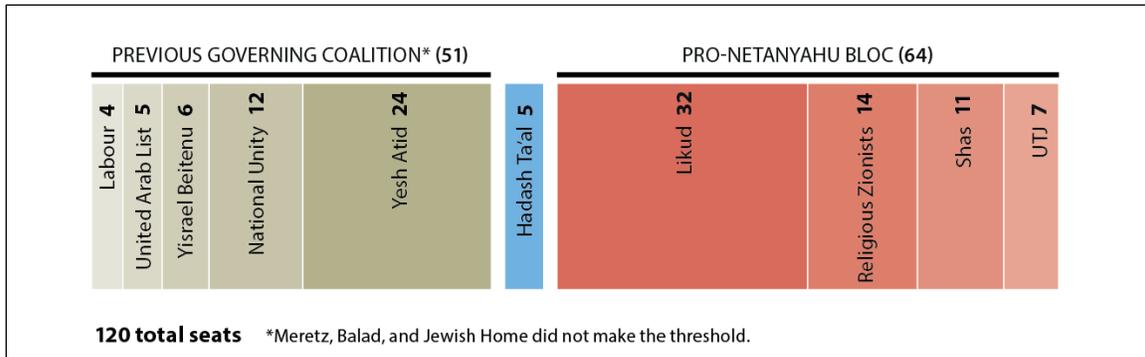
- Domestic Israeli issues, including a judicial reform proposal from the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that has triggered a highly charged national debate.
- Israeli-Palestinian violence and other problems.
- Israel’s relations with various Arab states since the 2020-2021 Abraham Accords.
- Concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and regional influence, including with Lebanon-based Hezbollah and in Syria.
- Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Domestic Issues

Netanyahu’s Return to Power and New Coalition Partners

On December 29, 2022, Israel’s Knesset (parliament) voted to reinstall Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu for a third stint as prime minister (his previous terms were 1996-1999 and 2009-2021). He heads a coalition government that includes ultra-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties (see **Figure 1** and **Appendix B**).

¹ For example, the Two-State Solution Act (H.R. 5344 from the 117th Congress) would have expressly prohibited 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 1. November 2022 Knesset Election Results

Source: Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, with graphic adapted by CRS. The Religious Zionism slate consists of three separate parties: Religious Zionism (7 seats), Jewish Power (6), and Noam (1).

The 2022 election was the fifth held in Israel since a legal process regarding corruption allegations against Netanyahu began in December 2018; his criminal trial is ongoing and could last for months or years.² 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. Coalition partners who support legal measures to help Netanyahu avoid criminal punishment may have leverage to pursue their policy preferences.³

Key Government Figures and Decisionmaking

Netanyahu's inclusion of ultra-nationalists Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir within the new Israeli government (see **Table 1**) 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.⁴ Coalition agreements state that the Jewish people have an "exclusive right" to the land between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River,⁵ appearing to conflict with Palestinian statehood aspirations. Smotrich has devoted his career to expanding Jewish control in the West Bank and advocating for the application of Jewish religious law in Israeli society.⁶ Ben Gvir expresses many similar views and has been a fixture at contentious gatherings of Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem.⁷ An Israeli court convicted him in 2007 for incitement to racism and supporting terrorism.⁸

Upon the government's formation, President Joe Biden stated that his Administration would work with the government to jointly address many issues in the region and "will continue to support the two state solution and oppose policies that endanger its viability or contradict our mutual interests

² Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Where the Benjamin Netanyahu trials stand – and where they are going – analysis," *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2022.

³ Ron Kampeas, "Why Netanyahu's new government could alienate Israel's conservative American allies," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 30, 2022.

⁴ Josef Federman, "As Israel's Netanyahu returns to office, troubles lie ahead," *Associated Press*, December 29, 2022.

⁵ Barak Ravid, "Israel swears in most right-wing government in its history," *Axios*, December 29, 2022.

⁶ "Bezalel Smotrich: The controversial and feared Netanyahu ally," *Ynetnews/i24News*, December 30, 2022.

⁷ Gregoire Sauvage, "Itamar Ben Gvir, the ultra-nationalist accused of stirring up violence in Jerusalem," May 15, 2021.

⁸ Etdar Lefkovits, "Ben-Gvir convicted of inciting to racism," *Jerusalem Post*, June 25, 2007.

and values.”⁹ Earlier, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the Administration will “gauge the government by the policies it pursues rather than individual personalities.”¹⁰

Table I. Israeli Government: Key Positions

Position	Name	Party
Prime Minister	Benjamin Netanyahu	Likud
Defense Minister	Yoav Gallant	Likud
Foreign Minister	Eli Cohen	Likud
Finance Minister and Minister within Defense Ministry	Bezael Smotrich	Religious Zionism
Justice Minister	Yariv Levin	Likud
National Security Minister	Itamar Ben Gvir	Jewish Power
Transportation Minister	Miri Regev	Likud
Strategic Affairs Minister	Ron Dermer	No formal affiliation
Energy Minister	Israel Katz	Likud
Agriculture and Rural Development Minister	Avi Dichter	Likud

Smotrich and Ben Gvir have each assumed some security responsibilities. Under the coalition agreements, Smotrich has a defense ministry position with formal responsibility over civil affairs units administering West Bank and Gaza Strip issues, including the planning commission that oversees West Bank settlement construction and home demolitions.¹¹ Ben Gvir heads a national security ministry with general authority over Israel’s police—including personnel that patrol Jerusalem and its disputed holy sites.¹² He also expects to oversee the border police, including units that have operated in the West Bank under Israel Defense Forces (IDF) authority.¹³ Ben Gvir supports easing open-fire conditions for security forces and increasing their legal immunity.¹⁴

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and top IDF leaders have apparently sought to prevent changes to the defense ministry and border police from disrupting the chain of command.¹⁵ In February 2023, Smotrich received general responsibilities to direct settlement planning and enforcement over illegal construction in the West Bank, while Gallant maintained formal powers to intervene in Smotrich’s decisions with cause.¹⁶ It is unclear how the arrangement will work in practice,

⁹ White House, “Statement from President Joe Biden on the New Government of the State of Israel,” December 29, 2022.

¹⁰ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the J Street National Conference,” December 4, 2022.

¹¹ Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Smotrich given authority over key West Bank appointments in deal with Likud,” *Times of Israel*, December 5, 2022.

¹² Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Knesset passes ‘Ben Gvir law,’ cementing minister’s expanded powers over police,” *Times of Israel*, December 28, 2022. For background on Jerusalem and its holy sites, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹³ “Likud agrees to split entire Border Police from police force, hand Ben Gvir control,” *Times of Israel*, December 29, 2022.

¹⁴ Keller-Lynn, “Knesset passes ‘Ben Gvir law.’”

¹⁵ Herb Keinon, “Israel’s new defense minister faces new challenges from within – analysis,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 2, 2023; Ash Obel, “Smotrich refuses to attend meeting with IDF chief on transfer of West Bank powers,” *Times of Israel*, January 25, 2023.

¹⁶ Jeremy Sharon, “Smotrich handed sweeping powers over West Bank, control over settlement planning,” *Times of Israel*, February 23, 2023.

especially if Gallant and Smotrich disagree on an issue that arguably has both civilian and national security implications.

In June, the Israeli government eased and expedited the process for settlement construction approval. While the process reportedly remains subject to final authorization by the prime minister, this move makes it harder for the defense minister or prime minister to slow the efforts of Smotrich or any successor in his position.¹⁷ U.S. and Palestinian Authority (PA) officials have criticized the Israeli action.¹⁸

Netanyahu has asserted that he will personally retain ultimate responsibility for policy.¹⁹ One Israeli journalist has argued that Netanyahu's efforts to act as a buffer between his coalition partners and Western countries concerned about their influence will eventually lead to him losing the support of one or the other.²⁰ Two former U.S. officials have written that if a 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."²¹

The coalition agreements are not legally binding.²² The degree of their implementation could have significant consequences for issues like West Bank annexation or legalization of outposts, the rights of minorities (including Arabs, women, and LGBTQ people), and diaspora immigration to Israel.²³ The part of the coalition agreement referring to the possible annexation of West Bank areas explicitly defers to Netanyahu's preferred timing and consideration of Israeli interests.²⁴

Proposed Judicial System Changes and Controversy

Overview

The government's proposed legislation on judicial reform has triggered a highly charged national debate over checks and balances in Israel. In January 2023, Justice Minister Yariv Levin introduced a plan to overhaul Israel's judicial system in the following ways:²⁵

- Require larger HCJ majorities to invalidate laws or government decisions.
- Allow the Knesset to override HCJ decisions, unless the full 15-judge panel decides unanimously.
- Give the government effective control of the panel that appoints judges.

¹⁷ Isabel Kershner, "Israel Eases Rules for Settlements in West Bank," *New York Times*, June 19, 2023.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; State Department, "The United States is Deeply Troubled with Israeli Settlement Announcement," June 18, 2023.

¹⁹ Steve Inskeep and Daniel Estrin, "'They are joining me. I'm not joining them': Netanyahu defends far-right allies," *NPR*, December 15, 2022.

²⁰ Ben Caspit, "Crisis imminent as Netanyahu's far-right partners set to govern West Bank," *Al-Monitor*, December 9, 2022.

²¹ Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, "A narrow government with Ben Gvir and Smotrich threatens US-Israel ties," *Times of Israel*, November 2, 2022.

²² Barak Ravid, "Israel swears in most right-wing government in its history," *Axios*, December 29, 2022.

²³ Tovah Lazaroff, "Netanyahu coalition pledges to advance West Bank annexation policies," *Jerusalem Post*, December 22, 2022; Rina Bassist, "With discrimination protections at risk, protests planned across Israel," *Al-Monitor*, December 28, 2022; Zvika Klein, "Netanyahu agrees to amend Law of Return in coalition deal with UTJ," *Jerusalem Post*, December 22, 2022.

²⁴ "Netanyahu agrees to amend Law of Return in coalition deal with UTJ," *Associated Press*, December 28, 2022.

²⁵ Jeremy Sharon, "Justice minister unveils plan to shackle the High Court, overhaul Israel's judiciary," *Times of Israel*, January 4, 2023.

- Prevent the HCJ from applying a “reasonableness” test to legislation and government action.
- Allow cabinet ministers to appoint legal advisers from outside the Justice Ministry’s aegis.

Reducing the judiciary’s power to curb Knesset majority-backed government action could allow this coalition to enact laws that have encountered or would likely encounter HCJ resistance. Such laws could include legalizing Jewish West Bank outposts on private Palestinian land, exempting ultra-Orthodox Jews from military conscription, or changing minority rights and the religious-secular balance in Israel.²⁶ It is unclear whether Prime Minister Netanyahu’s participation in the legislative process for the judicial reform proposal is legal because of an existing conflict of interest agreement barring him from matters that could affect his criminal case.²⁷ Netanyahu has participated in the ongoing debates despite the insistence of Israel’s attorney general that he is prohibited from doing so. In March, the Knesset passed a law that—if not overturned by the HCJ—would limit the circumstances under which a prime minister could be removed from office.²⁸

Since the government announced its proposed legislation in January, hundreds of thousands of Israelis have joined in regular protests in conjunction with opposition politicians,²⁹ and many former HCJ justices and attorneys general have strongly criticized the proposal and called on the government to withdraw it to prevent “serious damage” to the rule of law.³⁰ Widespread opposition has encompassed other sectors of society. A number of leading figures in Israel’s financial and economic sector—including the head of Israel’s central bank and several executives in the country’s high-tech industry—have expressed concern about the proposed judicial reforms’ potential impact on Israel’s economy and its global appeal.³¹ Additionally, many military and security personnel—including several reservists who play critical roles in the Israel Air Force—have joined protests and/or threatened to suspend their service if the proposals pass without significant change. In March, IDF chief of staff Lieutenant General Herzl Halevi said that the IDF could not operate without “the volunteering spirit of the reservists ... which depends on the preservation of the IDF as the ‘people’s army’ in a Jewish and democratic country.”³²

Netanyahu has defended the need for reform. He has argued that the HCJ has exercised broad powers of judicial review since the 1990s despite Israel’s lack of a written constitution as a clear reference point, while calling for substantive dialogue during the legislative process to ensure that the changes can be made responsibly.³³ HCJ President Esther Hayut has said that the HCJ intends

²⁶ Dov Lieber, “Israel’s Court Plan Deepens Divisions,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2023; “Israel unveils controversial plans to overhaul judicial system,” *Associated Press*, January 4, 2023.

²⁷ “Israel’s attorney-general tells Netanyahu to stay out of push for judicial changes,” *Reuters*, February 2, 2023; Chen Maanit, “Netanyahu Says No Conflict of Interest in His Judicial Reforms,” *Haaretz*, January 26, 2023.

²⁸ Henriette Chacar, “Israel’s attorney general accuses Netanyahu of breaking the law,” *Reuters*, March 24, 2023.

²⁹ Lieber, “Israel’s Court Plan Deepens Divisions”; “Anti-overhaul protesters call to turn up heat as over 300,000 estimated at rallies,” *Times of Israel*, March 11, 2023.

³⁰ Tamar Uriel-Beeri, “Former Israel A-Gs on reforms: ‘They threaten to destroy judicial system,’” *Jerusalem Post*, January 12, 2023.

³¹ Neri Zilber, “Will Less Democracy Kill Israel’s Tech Sector?” *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2023.

³² Neri Zilber, “Netanyahu Holds the Key to De-escalating Israel’s Crisis,” *Newlines Magazine*, March 16, 2023.

³³ “PM defends judicial overhaul: Amendments will be made responsibly, everyone calm down,” *Times of Israel*, January 13, 2022; Transcript: One-On-One with Israel’s Netanyahu amid Surging Violence, *CNN*, January 31, 2023. For some additional arguments supporting judicial reform in Israel, see Richard A. Epstein and Max Raskin, “Israel’s Proposed Judicial Reforms Aren’t ‘Extreme,’” *Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2023; and Peter Berkowitz, “Israel’s Constitutional Counterrevolution,” *Real Clear Politics*, February 5, 2023. For some historical context, see Patrick Kingsley, “Social Rifts, Spread over Decades, at the Root of Israel’s Judicial Crisis,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2023.

to examine any legislation enacted, raising the possibility of a constitutional crisis if the HCJ rules that the legislation is invalid.³⁴

Some observers warn about international implications of efforts to weaken Israel’s judiciary. For example, a former legal adviser for Israel’s defense ministry has said that international or foreign courts have to date largely trusted Israel’s justice system to deal with politicians or soldiers accused of illegal actions. He then speculated, “But if we get rid of that [current levels of domestic legal accountability] and give carte blanche to [soldiers to] do what they want and give them immunity from prosecution, it would open up all sorts of measures.”³⁵

Some Members of Congress have shared varying views on the reform proposal. For example, two Members of Congress expressed concerns in January that it might strain U.S.-Israel relations.³⁶ In February and March, a number of other Members voiced opinions. Some joined letters to President Biden or Israeli leaders—or made separate statements—expressing support for the principles of judicial review and minority rights.³⁷ Others stated confidence in Israelis to make their own democratic decisions.³⁸

In mid-March, Israeli President Isaac Herzog introduced a framework that he promoted as facilitating a compromise to preserve Israeli democracy and unity. It would aim to strengthen civil rights and limit the potential for a government backed by a narrow Knesset majority to make swift and major changes to the judiciary, absent broader support from national institutions.³⁹ Netanyahu rejected Herzog’s specific proposal while indicating that he remained open to compromise in principle.⁴⁰

In late March, the controversy over the proposed judicial reform legislation came to a head, as described in the timeline below.

Key Developments in Judicial Reform Debate: March 19-27

March 19	President Biden calls Prime Minister Netanyahu in support of a compromise consistent with democratic values such as “genuine checks and balances” and “the broadest possible base of popular support.” ⁴¹
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³⁴ David Horovitz, “Constitutional crisis looms, as Supreme Court president shows she won’t go quietly,” *Times of Israel*, January 12, 2023.

³⁵ Emanuel Fabian, “Former defense legal adviser warns against planned government moves in West Bank,” *Times of Israel*, January 23, 2023.

³⁶ Representative Jerrold Nadler, “As the Most Senior Jewish Member of Congress, I Now Fear Deeply for the U.S.-Israel Relationship,” *Haaretz*, January 25, 2023; Representative Brad Sherman, interviewed in Ben Samuels, “Top pro-Israel Democrat Warns Netanyahu Government ‘Mistakes’ Could Erode U.S. Support,” *Haaretz*, January 23, 2023.

³⁷ Full text of two letters available at <https://delauero.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/delauro.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/final-3.8.23-delauro-schakowsky-mcgovern-letter-to-biden-administration-on-two-state-solution-compressed.pdf> and https://nadler.house.gov/uploadedfiles/3.9.23_letter_to_israeli_government_final.pdf. See also Laura Kelly, “Netanyahu’s judicial reforms have US lawmakers worried about Israeli democracy,” *The Hill*, March 9, 2023; Marc Rod, “While some sound alarm, pro-Israel members call for measured approach on judicial reform,” *Jewish Insider*, February 16, 2023.

³⁸ Rod, “While some sound alarm, pro-Israel members call for measured approach on judicial reform.”

³⁹ “Warning of civil war, Herzog unveils framework for judicial reform; PM rejects it,” *Times of Israel*, March 15, 2023.

⁴⁰ Patrick Kingsley, “An Effort to Resolve Israel’s Impasse Stalls on How to Pick Judges,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2023; Elliott Abrams, “Israel and the Debate over the Role of the Judiciary in Democratic Government,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 16, 2023.

⁴¹ White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel,” March 19, 2023.

March 19-20	Israeli government announces postponement of most of the judicial reform legislation, but continues to press forward with plans to pass a bill that would give it major—though not total—control over judicial appointments ⁴²
March 25	Defense Minister Gallant departs from Netanyahu's position by calling for a pause to the legislation, based on stated concerns that domestic contention is affecting Israel's military and security forces.
March 26	Netanyahu announces a decision to fire Gallant (as discussed below, Netanyahu reverses this decision in April). U.S. National Security Council spokesperson says developments "further underscore the urgent need for compromise." ⁴³
March 27	After protests against the legislation expand—along with counter-demonstrations in support of the legislation—and a general strike closes down much of Israel, Netanyahu announces that all judicial reform legislation will be postponed to prevent a rift among Israelis. Netanyahu proclaims readiness to engage in dialogue with the opposition to "bring a reform that will restore the balance between the different branches of government while strengthening civil liberties." ⁴⁴

Assessment

It is unclear how the March 2023 postponement will affect legislative outcomes on judicial reform. In a March interview, Netanyahu said that the Knesset should be limited in its power to nullify HCJ decisions. That issue is separate from the judicial appointments clause that appears to be more central to the controversy—with the ruling coalition seeking an automatic majority on the judicial appointments committee, and the opposition arguing to maintain a political-professional balance on the committee that prevents a clear majority (see text box below).⁴⁵ In the same interview, Netanyahu reiterated his view that the HCJ needs checking to strengthen Israeli democracy.⁴⁶

In April, Netanyahu said that there was no deadline to enact judicial reform legislation, and that his priority is to achieve broad national consensus.⁴⁷ One journalist speculated that Netanyahu was looking for ways to distance himself from his ultra-nationalist coalition partners in light of concerns about possible declines in his approval rating, domestic political and economic stability, Israeli-Palestinian tensions, and relations with the United States.⁴⁸ Reportedly, National Security Minister Ben Gvir acquiesced to giving the government until late July to pass consensus-based judicial reform, after receiving Netanyahu's agreement that if the government and opposition cannot reach agreement, the legislation will pass unilaterally.⁴⁹ On April 14, Moody's Investors Service kept Israel's credit ratings constant, but downgraded the outlook on those ratings from

⁴² Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Biden tells Bibi he's never seen such anxiety over Israel's political situation," *Axios*, March 20, 2023; Jeremy Sharon, "Ostensibly softened, Rothman bill gives coalition broad control over choice of judges," *Times of Israel*, March 21, 2023.

⁴³ White House, "Statement from NSC Spokesperson Adrienne Watson on Developments in Israel," March 26, 2023.

⁴⁴ Barak Ravid, "Bibi suspends judicial overhaul after mass protests across Israel," *Axios*, March 27, 2023.

⁴⁵ Dov Lieber, "Netanyahu Vows Compromise on Judiciary," *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2023.

⁴⁶ "Netanyahu in weekend interview: Overhaul necessary as Supreme Court 'too powerful,'" *Times of Israel*, March 27, 2023.

⁴⁷ Ben Caspit, "Israel's Netanyahu falls in polls, could abandon judicial overhaul," *Al-Monitor*, April 14, 2023.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

“positive” to “stable,” reflecting “a deterioration of Israel’s governance, as illustrated by the recent events around the government’s proposal for overhauling the country’s judiciary.”⁵⁰

Polls have suggested that a majority of Israelis may support some form of judicial reform, but the specific reforms introduced by the government in January seem to attract only minority support. Majorities appear to favor compromises that would preserve at least some judicial review powers and a role for justices alongside politicians in making judicial appointments.⁵¹

After the March postponement, President Biden expressed hope that Netanyahu would walk away from the judicial reform proposals and reiterated his earlier call for compromise. He also dismissed the idea of Netanyahu visiting the White House “in the near term.”⁵² Netanyahu has said that Israel will not make decisions based on outside pressure,⁵³ but referred to U.S.-Israel ties as “unshakeable” while virtually addressing the State Department’s 2023 Summit for Democracy.⁵⁴ During a visit to Israel in May, Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy said, “I think the pause, the idea of bringing both sides together to find common ground would be a good place. But I do think that there are elements, when I read the law, where you would want to look for reforms.”⁵⁵

Judicial Appointments Committee and Controversy

The Israeli Judicial Appointments Committee (JAC) is made up of nine members: two Knesset members (MKs), two government ministers, two representatives of the Israel Bar Association, and three HCJ judges. A simple majority of five JAC members can appoint most judges; HCJ picks need the approval of seven JAC members.⁵⁶ Under the government’s initial proposal for judicial reform, it would have obtained a sufficient majority to effectively control all appointments. During the March crisis on the issue, the government floated a “compromise” plan that would permit each Israeli government to obtain and use majority control on the JSC to appoint up to two HCJ judges as vacancies arise, and then require broader agreement to fill any additional HCJ vacancies.⁵⁷

With Israel’s opposition still protesting the government’s proposals as of June, the Knesset held its regularly scheduled vote to select the two MKs for the JAC. Amid threats from some coalition figures to select two coalition MKs if negotiations toward an overall judicial reform compromise had not progressed, the Knesset selected an MK from the opposition, but Netanyahu had it delay the selection of a coalition MK for up to a month, thereby preventing the JAC from convening during that time. In response, the opposition said it would pause compromise negotiations until the selection process is complete.⁵⁸

Following the suspension of coalition-opposition negotiations in June, officials from the government said that they would try to enact legislation before the Knesset’s summer recess begins in late July seeking to prevent judicial review of the “reasonableness” of government decisions. Finance Minister Smotrich said that this effort would be “slower, with more moderate

⁵⁰ Moody’s Investors Service, “Moody’s changes outlook on Israel to stable from positive, affirms A1 ratings,” April 14, 2023.

⁵¹ Tamar Hermann and Or Anabi, “Only a Minority of Israelis Support the Proposed Judicial Overhaul,” Israel Democracy Institute, February 21, 2023, and “Overhauling the Judicial System – What Do Israelis Think?” Israel Democracy Institute, February 3, 2023; “Direct Polls: 3/4 of Israelis support judicial reform,” *Israel National News*, March 7, 2023.

⁵² Josef Federman, “Israeli PM, Biden exchange frosty words over legal overhaul,” *Associated Press*, March 29, 2023.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Netanyahu Addresses the US State Dept. Summit for Democracy 2023,” March 29, 2023.

⁵⁵ Omer Lachmanovitch and Ariel Kahana, “This administration should get further behind the Abraham Accords,” *Israel Hayom*, May 1, 2023.

⁵⁶ Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Vote on identity of MKs on judge selection panel seen as test for overhaul talks,” *Times of Israel*, June 14, 2023.

⁵⁷ Sharon, “Ostensibly softened, Rothman bill gives coalition broad control over choice of judges.”

⁵⁸ Patrick Kingsley, “Israel’s Judicial Crisis Resurfaces as Talks Abruptly Halt,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2023.

steps” than the legislative push earlier in the year. Reportedly, the government may introduce a new bill on judicial appointments during the Knesset’s winter session, which begins in October.⁵⁹

Amid continuing public debate, Netanyahu has roundly criticized military reservists threatening not to serve. He also has sought to convince military leadership to do more to counter this behavior.⁶⁰ Some Israeli analysts have suggested that reservists’ actions played a major role in pressuring Netanyahu to pause the judicial reform legislation.⁶¹ As various media sources speculated in early 2023 on the effect future controversies might have on reservists as well as full-time personnel, some surveys indicated that reservists’ military service had not decreased drastically.⁶²

Facing negative public polling from his decision—never fully finalized—to fire Defense Minister Gallant, Netanyahu reversed the decision in early April.⁶³ Pressure on Netanyahu to clearly reinstate Gallant came at a time when Israel’s military has faced heightened challenges or threats from violence in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Lebanon.⁶⁴

Gallant’s reinstatement came shortly after Israeli media reported that the IDF’s Military Intelligence directorate had warned Israel’s top national security decisionmakers that Israel’s strategic situation and deterrence had eroded for various reasons, particularly domestic division over judicial reform legislation. According to *Israel Hayom*:

This view of Israel is shared by all members of the anti-Israeli axis led by Iran, and it has been clearly manifested in the series of meetings held by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials aimed at coordinating their positions.... The Palestinian Authority has also been encouraged by the US-Israel friction and it hopes to seize on it, particularly in international forums – from UN committees to The Hague.⁶⁵

Israeli-Palestinian Issues⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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

⁵⁹ Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Coalition moves to restart overhaul, sets plan to limit High Court’s judicial review,” *Times of Israel*, June 19, 2023.

⁶⁰ Amos Harel, “Netanyahu Tries to Regain Control of His Generals, but May Lose Another Battle,” *Haaretz*, April 7, 2023.

⁶¹ Dion Nissenbaum et al., “Soldiers Forced Netanyahu’s Hand,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2023.

⁶² Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Is volunteering for IDF reserve duty cratering or stable? – analysis,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 27, 2023.

⁶³ Barak Ravid, “In reversal, Netanyahu says he’s keeping Gallant as Israel’s defense minister,” *Axios*, April 10, 2023.

⁶⁴ Ben Caspit, “Israel, Lebanon’s Hezbollah agree to avoid confrontation, but for how long?” *Al-Monitor*, April 7, 2023.

⁶⁵ Yoav Limor, “Exclusive: Intelligence Directorate sounds alarm over eroding Israeli deterrence,” *Israel Hayom*, April 4, 2023.

⁶⁶ See also CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁶⁷ State Department Press Briefing, February 23, 2023; White House, “Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority in Joint Press Statement | Bethlehem, West Bank,” July 15, 2022.

Administration.⁶⁸ These officials regularly speak out against steps taken by Israelis or Palestinians that could fuel violence and risk undermining the vision of two states.⁶⁹ In January 2023 remarks made alongside PA President Mahmoud Abbas during a visit to the West Bank, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said:

Meanwhile, we oppose any action by either side that makes that goal [a two-state solution] more difficult to achieve, more distant. And we've been clear that this includes things like settlement expansion, the legalization of outposts, demolitions and evictions, disruptions to the historic status quo of the holy sites, and of course incitement and acquiescence to violence. We look to both sides to unequivocally condemn any acts of violence regardless of the victim or the perpetrator.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

Israel's previous government took some steps to improve Palestinians' economic and living circumstances, including through loans and work permits.⁷² However, some critics charged that the measures mirrored past Israeli efforts to manage the conflict's effects unilaterally rather than address its causes through negotiation with Palestinians.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ As of April 2023, Israeli personnel began 24-hour operations at the Allenby crossing five days a week.⁷⁵

Israeli-Palestinian tensions have heightened in 2023. In response to a Palestinian-backed U.N. General Assembly resolution in December 2022 requesting an International Court of Justice advisory opinion on Israeli actions in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza, the Netanyahu government has taken a number of retaliatory actions. These include withholding tax revenue due the PA (partly authorized by existing Israeli law) and rerouting some of it to Israeli families victimized by terrorism, freezing construction plans for Palestinians in parts of the West Bank, and rescinding expedited travel privileges at checkpoints for PA officials.⁷⁶ Some countries

⁶⁸ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁶⁹ 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.

⁷⁰ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas After Their Meeting," January 31, 2023.

⁷¹ Niels Lesniewski, "White House confirms Biden will keep embassy in Jerusalem," *Roll Call*, February 9, 2021.

⁷² 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.

⁷³ Neri Zilber, "Israel's new plan is to 'shrink,' not solve, the Palestinian conflict," *CNN*, September 16, 2021.

⁷⁴ White House, "FACT SHEET: The United States-Palestinian Relationship," July 14, 2022. The Allenby crossing is scheduled to operate on a nearly continuous basis starting in April 2023. Jacob Magid, "After US pressure, Allenby crossing to Jordan set to open at all hours on weekdays," *Times of Israel*, November 24, 2022.

⁷⁵ Rina Bassist, "Israel expands border crossing hours for Palestinians going to Jordan," *Al-Monitor*, April 3, 2023.

⁷⁶ "Israel to withhold PA tax revenue, impose other sanctions after Abbas's UN success," *Times of Israel*, January 6, 2023; Tovah Lazaroff, "Smotrich doubles penalties for pay-for-slay, withholds NIS 100m," *Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2023.

(including France, Germany, and Japan) signed a statement expressing deep concern regarding these Israeli steps, calling them “punitive measures against the Palestinian people, leadership, and civil society.”⁷⁷

In January 2023, National Security Minister Ben Gvir visited Jerusalem’s Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif (“Mount/Haram”) a few days after taking office, triggering statements of condemnation or concern from Palestinians and several governments both within the region and globally.⁷⁸ Netanyahu pledged to maintain the historic “status quo” that allows only Muslims to worship at the holy site, and downplayed Ben Gvir’s visit by referring to previous ministerial visits to the site.⁷⁹ Expressing deep concern about the potentially provocative nature of Ben Gvir’s visit, the State Department spokesperson called on Netanyahu to keep his commitment on the status quo.⁸⁰ During Netanyahu’s late January visit to King Abdullah II of Jordan, which has a custodial role over the Mount/Haram, the king reportedly told Netanyahu that Israel should respect the “historic and legal status quo in the Holy Aqsa mosque and not violate it.”⁸¹ The State Department reiterated its concern about provocations and the status quo after another visit by Ben Gvir in May.⁸²

⁷⁷ Luke Tress, “Over 90 countries urge Israel to lift sanctions put on Palestinians after UN vote,” *Times of Israel*, January 17, 2023.

⁷⁸ Barak Ravid, “Israeli ultranationalist minister visits sensitive Jerusalem holy site, raising tensions,” *Axios*, January 3, 2023; U.N. Security Council, “Leaders on All Sides of Palestinian Question Must Help Alleviate Tensions, Maintain Status Quo at Jerusalem’s Holy Sites, Senior Peace Official Tells Security Council,” January 5, 2023.

⁷⁹ Transcript: One-On-One with Israel’s Netanyahu amid Surging Violence. For background, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁸⁰ State Department Press Briefing, January 3, 2023.

⁸¹ “King Abdullah meets Israeli PM Netanyahu in surprise Jordan visit, royal court says,” *Reuters*, January 24, 2023. For background, see CRS Report RL33546, *Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

⁸² “US flogs Ben Gvir for ‘provocative, inflammatory’ tour on tense Temple Mount,” *Times of Israel*, May 22, 2023.

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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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 2014.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

Israel-West Bank Violence, Settlements, and Other Tensions

Overview of violence and some countermeasures. After an upsurge in Israeli-Palestinian violence during 2022 that resulted in the deaths of 30 Israelis or foreigners in Israel and at least 170 Palestinians in the West Bank,⁸⁹ violence has spiked in the first half of 2023. For this year as of June, at least 20 Israelis and 120 West Bank Palestinians have died from attacks by militants and/or extremists on both sides against civilians and/or their property, or clashes involving Israeli security forces and Palestinian militants.⁹⁰

Since at least the second half of 2022, Israeli counterterrorism efforts have concentrated 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.⁹¹ As the increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence has attracted greater U.S. policy attention,⁹² Israeli and PA forces have approached West Bank militants in different ways, leading to some tensions and the possibility of

⁸³ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁸⁴ 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.

⁸⁵ David Makovsky, “Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 25, 2021.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Aaron Boxerman, “UN to begin dispensing Qatari cash to needy Gazan families Monday under new deal,” *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021.

⁸⁸ Yaniv Kubovich, “Egypt, Qatar Reach Breakthrough on Hamas Civil Servants Salaries,” *Haaretz*, November 29, 2021; Abu Amer, “Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas.”

⁸⁹ Patrick Kingsley, “As Violence Rages, New Israeli Alliance Risks Fueling Even More of It,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2023.

⁹⁰ Dov Lieber, “Israel Fires at Palestinians from Air,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2023.

⁹¹ Isabel Kershner, “Palestinian Assailant Kills Three Israelis in the West Bank,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2022.

⁹² 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.

future escalation.⁹³ The PA reportedly has sought time and flexibility to address militancy independent of Israeli dictates, as part of an effort 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.⁹⁴

Israel's government approved measures in January that Prime Minister Netanyahu said were aimed at curbing terrorism, but might further fuel tensions, including steps reducing benefits for families of accused terrorists, accelerating home demolitions and West Bank settlement building, reinforcing Israeli military and police units, and expediting gun licenses for Israelis.⁹⁵ In defending Israel's steps as "targeted action on the terrorists and their immediate circle," Netanyahu said that he continues to allow 150,000 Palestinians to work in Israel, has reduced security checkpoints, and encourages investment by Israelis and "our new peace partners in the Gulf" in Palestinian areas of the West Bank.⁹⁶

After a deadly January Israeli raid in Jenin, the PA announced a suspension of security coordination with Israel,⁹⁷ but its practical meaning is unclear.⁹⁸ Previously, the PA publicly suspended security coordination with Israel for a few months in 2020 when Israel was contemplating annexation of West Bank areas.⁹⁹ In February, President Abbas reportedly told Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns that Israel-PA intelligence sharing has continued, and that he would fully resume coordination once calm is restored.¹⁰⁰ Burns later remarked that the ongoing tensions have an "unhappy resemblance to some of the realities" of the 2000-2005 period of Israeli-Palestinian violence known as the second Palestinian *intifada* (or uprising).¹⁰¹ An Israeli observer has argued that PA leadership under Abbas is unlikely to coordinate efforts against Israelis in the way Palestinian leaders supposedly did during the *intifada*.¹⁰²

Efforts to deescalate amid continuing challenges. During Secretary Blinken's January visit to the West Bank, he said that "it's important to take steps to de-escalate, to stop the violence, to reduce tensions, and to try as well to create the foundation for more positive actions going forward."¹⁰³ He also said that he discussed with President Abbas "the importance of the Palestinian Authority itself continuing to improve its governance and accountability,

⁹³ Isabel Kershner, "Israeli Military Targets New Palestinian Militia," *New York Times*, October 26, 2022; Yaniv Kubovich and Jack Khoury, "Nablus' 'Lion's Den' Has Become a Major Headache for Israel and the Palestinian Authority," *Haaretz*, October 12, 2022.

⁹⁴ Ahmad Melhem, "Palestinian security forces become more involved in resistance in West Bank," *Al-Monitor*, October 12, 2022.

⁹⁵ Dov Lieber et al., "Israeli-Palestinian Violence Grows," *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2023; Raja Abdulrahim, "Palestinian Is Shot Dead Outside Israeli Settlement in West Bank as Violence Rages," *New York Times*, January 30, 2023.

⁹⁶ Transcript: One-On-One with Israel's Netanyahu amid Surging Violence.

⁹⁷ "In light of the massacre in Jenin, Palestinian leadership declares end to security coordination with Israel," *Wafa News Agency*, January 26, 2023.

⁹⁸ Yoni Ben Menachem, "By Ending Security Coordination with Israel, the Palestinian Authority Is Shooting Itself in the Foot," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, January 30, 2023.

⁹⁹ "Palestinian Authority resuming cooperation with Israel, Palestinian official says," *Reuters*, November 17, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Jacob Magid, "CIA director: Current Israeli-Palestinian tensions resemble Second Intifada," *Times of Israel*, February 7, 2023.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Micah Halpern, "Terror wave in Israel not an *intifada*, but still very dangerous – opinion," *Jerusalem Post*, November 28, 2022.

¹⁰³ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas After Their Meeting."

strengthening the institutions of the PA.”¹⁰⁴ According to one media report, Blinken encouraged Abbas privately to implement a security plan presented to Israel and the PA weeks earlier by the U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (USSC), Lieutenant General Michael Fenzel.¹⁰⁵ The plan supposedly lays out steps for PA security forces to regain control in Jenin and Nablus, including the training of a special PA force. Reportedly, PA officials expressed reservations about the plan, partly because it may not explicitly call for Israel to reduce incursions into West Bank cities or include other provisions calculated to attract Palestinian public support.¹⁰⁶

In February, the Israeli government decided to advance West Bank plans to construct nearly 10,000 additional settlement units and begin a process to retroactively legalize nine outposts that had previously been illegal under Israeli law—triggering a statement of strong opposition from Secretary Blinken.¹⁰⁷ Over the next week, U.S.-brokered diplomacy reportedly averted a Palestinian-supported U.N. Security Council (UNSC) draft resolution condemning the Israeli action.¹⁰⁸ Instead, the UNSC issued a presidential statement that expressed deep concern and dismay about the Israeli decision, strongly opposed “all unilateral measures that impede peace,” and called for “upholding unchanged the historic status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem in word and in practice” and Jordan’s custodial role.¹⁰⁹

A few days later, the United States, Israel, the PA, Jordan, and Egypt issued a communique from Aqaba, Jordan aimed at de-escalating tensions and violence by committing Israel and the PA to suspend unilateral measures for a few months.¹¹⁰ In March, with incidents of violence recurring, the five parties reconvened as scheduled in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, and restated the commitments from Aqaba. They also specified plans to work toward empowering PA security forces, develop a mechanism to curb violence, and establish a separate mechanism to improve Palestinian economic conditions.¹¹¹ Reportedly, the PA had agreed in February to start implementing the USSC security plan,¹¹² which one source has said would involve “the recruitment and training of thousands of Palestinian security personnel to be deployed in the northern West Bank.”¹¹³ Later in March, the foreign ministers of all six Gulf Cooperation Council countries (the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman) sent a letter to Secretary Blinken urging the Biden Administration “to play its role in reaching a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the conflict based on the principles of international law.”¹¹⁴

Also in March, the Knesset passed legislation to overturn parts of a 2005 law that had made Jewish settlements in certain areas of the northern West Bank illegal. In that year, then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had affirmed in writing to then-President George W. Bush that Israel

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Blinken pressed Abbas to accept U.S. security plan for Jenin,” *Axios*, February 1, 2023. For background on the USSC, whose office oversees a multilateral mission based in Jerusalem, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ State Department, “Israeli Settlement and Outpost Legalization Announcement,” February 13, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Michelle Nichols, “No U.N. vote Monday on Israel settlements, diplomats say,” *Reuters*, February 19, 2023; Barak Ravid, “Israeli-Palestinian showdown at UN averted after U.S. mediation,” *Axios*, February 19, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ U.N. Security Council, Statement by the President of the Security Council (S/PRST/2023/1), February 20, 2023.

¹¹⁰ State Department, “Aqaba Joint Communique,” February 26, 2023.

¹¹¹ State Department, “Joint Communique from the March 19 meeting in Sharm El Sheikh,” March 19, 2023.

¹¹² Barak Ravid, “Israeli-Palestinian showdown at UN averted after U.S. mediation,” *Axios*, February 19, 2023.

¹¹³ Yoni Ben Menachem, “American-Israeli Military Coordination and the Possibility of Regional Escalation,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, March 9, 2023.

¹¹⁴ “GCC foreign ministers condemn Israeli minister in letter to Blinken,” *The National* (UAE), March 26, 2023.

committed to evacuate settlements and outposts in that region. A State Department spokesperson said that the United States is extremely troubled about the legislation, and that it clearly contradicts Israel's longtime undertaking to the United States, as well commitments it made earlier in March to de-escalate Israeli-Palestinian tensions.¹¹⁵ After Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Herzog to convey U.S. concern about the legislation,¹¹⁶ Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying that Israel's government has "no intention of establishing new communities" in the West Bank areas in question.¹¹⁷ The relocation of a yeshiva (Jewish religious school) within one of these areas in May triggered additional criticism from the State Department,¹¹⁸ as did additional settlement-related announcements from Israel in June.¹¹⁹

Widening of conflict? In June, clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants intensified in the northern West Bank, with reports indicating that Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad may have increased their direct involvement.¹²⁰ Israeli officials appear to be debating the merits of widening the scale of counterterrorism operations. The Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) has reportedly expressed concerns about the potential for Iran-backed West Bank militants to increasingly obstruct Israelis' freedom of maneuver by using tactics similar to those of Iran-supported groups in Gaza or Lebanon—including more sophisticated use of improvised explosive devices.¹²¹ However, some IDF officials reportedly worry about possible disadvantages, particularly that a more overt war footing in the West Bank could harden negative Palestinian popular attitudes toward Israel.¹²² The State Department continues to urge de-escalation.¹²³

The Abraham Accords

General overview. In late 2020 and early 2021, Israel reached agreements to normalize or improve its relations with four members of the Arab League: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The Trump Administration facilitated each of these agreements, known as the Abraham Accords, and provided U.S. security, diplomatic, or economic incentives for most of the countries in question.¹²⁴ In 2021, Israel opened embassies in the UAE and Bahrain, and both countries reciprocated. Israel and Morocco also reopened the liaison offices that each country had operated in the other from the mid-1990s to 2000. While Saudi Arabia has

¹¹⁵ State Department Press Briefing, March 21, 2023.

¹¹⁶ State Department, "Deputy Secretary Sherman's Meeting with Israeli Ambassador to the United States Herzog," March 21, 2023.

¹¹⁷ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "Prime Minister's Office Statement on the Knesset Decision to Repeal Parts of the Disengagement Law," March 22, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Ben Caspit, "Israel's Netanyahu further provokes Biden with relocation of outpost yeshiva," *Al-Monitor*, May 30, 2023.

¹¹⁹ State Department, "The United States is Deeply Troubled with Israeli Settlement Announcement."

¹²⁰ Isabel Kershner, "Five Palestinians, Including 15-Year-Old Boy, Are Killed in Israeli Raid in the West Bank," *New York Times*, June 20, 2023; Ben Caspit, "Israel increasingly fears West Bank chaos, rise of Hamas," *Al-Monitor*, June 20, 2023.

¹²¹ Caspit, "Israel increasingly fears West Bank chaos, rise of Hamas"; Emanuel Fabian, "After roadside bomb during Jenin raid, Gallant says 'all options on the table,'" *Times of Israel*, June 20, 2023.

¹²² Caspit, "Israel increasingly fears West Bank chaos, rise of Hamas."

¹²³ Fabian, "After roadside bomb during Jenin raid, Gallant says 'all options on the table.'"

¹²⁴ See <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>. 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.

not normalized its relations with Israel, it reportedly supported the UAE and Bahrain in their decisions to join the Abraham Accords.¹²⁵ Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Oman have opened their airspace to Israeli civilian airlines, significantly reducing their travel time to Asian destinations. The Sudanese military's seizure of power in October 2021 froze the Israel-Sudan normalization process.¹²⁶ In January 2023, the Sudanese military leadership said that Sudan would sign a normalization deal with Israel after it transitions to a civilian government,¹²⁷ but an outbreak of new civil conflict in Sudan in April may delay any major developments on that front for the foreseeable future.

Trade, tourism, and investment ties among the other Accords countries have deepened, particularly between Israel and the UAE. Some notable developments include an Israel-UAE free trade agreement that went into effect in March 2023, and a major Israel-UAE-Jordan initiative focused on desalinated water and solar energy. As a sign of mutual high-level commitment to the Accords, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met the foreign ministers of Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt at a March 2022 summit in Israel's southern Negev desert to inaugurate a regional cooperation framework. The framework features periodic Negev Forum meetings, as well as working groups engaging regularly on clean energy, education and coexistence, food and water security, health, regional security, and tourism.¹²⁸ Participants have expected that a 2023 foreign ministerial meeting would take place in Morocco, but U.S. officials reportedly told Israel that plans for holding the meeting in July would be postponed due to an Israeli settlement construction announcement in June.¹²⁹ Developments since the new Israeli government took office have reportedly fueled some concerns among Arab governments about closer ties with Israel, including the new government's actions against Palestinians, Israeli domestic discord, and some apparent U.S.-Israel differences.¹³⁰

Despite closer government-to-government ties and broader Israel-UAE economic cooperation, public opinion polling in Arab states indicates that long-standing popular opposition to regional governments recognizing Israel remains strong.¹³¹ According to one poll, support in the UAE and Bahrain for the Accords dropped from 47% and 45%, respectively, in 2020 to 25% and 20% in 2022.¹³² However, the same poll shows incremental increases in support since 2020 within the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia to permit private business and sports ties with Israelis.¹³³

U.S. and Israeli officials seek to expand the Abraham Accords to include other Arab and Muslim-majority countries. Secretary Blinken has 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

¹²⁵ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Jake Sullivan discussed Saudi-Israel normalization with MBS," *Axios*, October 20, 2021.

¹²⁶ 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.

¹²⁷ "Israel, Sudan announce deal to normalise relations," *Reuters*, February 3, 2023.

¹²⁸ State Department, "The Negev Forum Working Groups and Regional Cooperation Framework," January 10, 2023; Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Meeting of the Negev Forum steering committee and working groups opens in Abu Dhabi," January 9, 2023.

¹²⁹ Itamar Eichner, "US responds to new settlement construction: postpones Negev Forum in Morocco," *Ynetnews*, June 18, 2023.

¹³⁰ Dion Nissenbaum, "Israel's Ties with Arabs Falter," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2023; Limor, "Exclusive: Intelligence Directorate sounds alarm over eroding Israeli deterrence."

¹³¹ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *2022 Arab Opinion Index*, January 3, 2023.

¹³² Dion Nissenbaum, "Israeli Official Visits Bahrain to Lift Ties," *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2022; Dylan Kassin and David Pollock, "Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 15, 2022.

¹³³ Kassin and Pollock, "Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords."

Israel in the years ahead.”¹³⁴ In June 2023, Blinken said that the Administration would soon create a new position to further U.S. diplomacy and engagement toward deepening and broadening the Accords.¹³⁵ However, the Biden Administration’s willingness to offer major U.S. policy inducements to countries in connection with normalization efforts remains unclear.¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷ Negev Forum members acknowledge that part of their mandate is to “create momentum in Israeli-Palestinian relations.”¹³⁸ However, the PA has opted not to join the forum. 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.¹³⁹ Jordan also has remained on the sidelines of the Negev Forum, conditioning its involvement on PA participation.¹⁴⁰

Normalization efforts with Saudi Arabia. In May 2023, an unnamed senior Israeli diplomatic source was cited as saying that “the Saudi [normalization] issue is now more important than anything else” for Netanyahu’s foreign policy. “He knows that Israel cannot stop Iran on its own.”¹⁴¹ Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud has expressed general support for normalization with Israel but stated in January 2023 that “true normalization and true stability will only come through giving the Palestinians hope, through giving the Palestinians dignity. That requires giving the Palestinians a state, and that’s the priority.”¹⁴² Various factors could complicate an Israel-Saudi normalization process, including the March 2023 Saudi-Iran normalization deal brokered by China, Saudi desires for stronger U.S. support for Saudi security and civilian nuclear priorities (which might require congressional approval), and Arab concerns regarding increased Israeli-Palestinian tensions and violence.¹⁴³ One media report has suggested that while Arab states like Saudi Arabia “may see Iran as a menace, they see little gain in isolating and opposing Tehran to the extent that Israel does.”¹⁴⁴ A 2023 public opinion poll suggests that

¹³⁴ 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.

¹³⁵ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the 2023 American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Summit,” June 5, 2023.

¹³⁶ Michael Koplow et al., “Biden has an opportunity to put his own stamp on Arab-Israeli relations,” *The Hill*, October 14, 2021.

¹³⁷ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after Their Meeting,” January 30, 2023.

¹³⁸ The Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework Adopted by the Steering Committee on November 10th, 2022, hyperlink to document available at <https://www.state.gov/the-negev-forum-working-groups-and-regional-cooperation-framework/>.

¹³⁹ Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, “Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal,” *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Jacob Magid, “US laments Jordan’s absence from Negev Forum, aims to keep Palestinians in loop,” *Times of Israel*, January 8, 2023.

¹⁴¹ Ben Caspit, “For Israel, normalization with Saudi Arabia not impossible,” *Al-Monitor*, May 16, 2023.

¹⁴² Marita Kassis, “Saudi FM says no normalizing ties with Israel before Palestinian issue resolved,” *Al-Monitor*, January 20, 2023.

¹⁴³ Mark Mazzetti et al., “U.S., in Long Shot, Seeks Saudi Deal with Netanyahu,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2023; Elizabeth Hagedorn, “Israeli-Saudi normalization still elusive despite US push,” *Al-Monitor*, May 25, 2023; Barak Ravid, “Biden admin pushing for Saudi-Israeli peace deal by end of year, officials say,” *Axios*, May 17, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Patrick Kingsley, “For Israel, Saudi Deal with Iran Undermines Its Hopes of Isolating Tehran,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2023.

large majorities of Saudis oppose normalization with both Israel and Iran, and that about 18% support cooperation with Israel against Iran.¹⁴⁵

During Secretary Blinken's June 2023 visit to Saudi Arabia, he said that helping normalize Israeli-Saudi ties is a U.S. priority, saying, "We discussed it here, and we will continue to work at it, to advance it in the days, weeks, and months ahead."¹⁴⁶ In the same briefing, Saudi Foreign Minister Al Saud said:

I have said before and it's quite clear that we believe that normalization is in the interest of the region, that it would bring significant benefits to all. But without finding a pathway to peace for the Palestinian people, without addressing that challenge, any normalization will have limited benefits. And therefore, I think we should continue to focus on finding a pathway towards a two-state solution, on finding a pathway towards giving the Palestinians dignity and justice.¹⁴⁷

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 (AOR), partly to encourage military interoperability as a means of reinforcing closer ties between Israel and many Arab states.¹⁴⁸ Israel had previously been under the purview of U.S. European Command. CENTCOM formalized Israel's move in September 2021,¹⁴⁹ and in October an Israeli Defense Forces liaison was stationed at CENTCOM headquarters.¹⁵⁰ 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.¹⁵¹

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 reportedly expressed interest in closer security cooperation with Israel.¹⁵² Earlier, both Morocco (November 2021) and Bahrain (February 2022) signed MOUs with Israel on security cooperation.¹⁵³ These MOUs appear to anticipate more intelligence sharing, joint exercises and training, and arms sales. Reports indicate that Israel has agreed to sell air defense systems to all three countries and may be

¹⁴⁵ David Pollock, "New Saudi Opinion Poll Shows 40 Percent Still Back Some Ties with Israel," Washington Institute for Near East Policy (Fikra Forum), May 15, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud at a Joint Press Availability," June 8, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Jared Szuba, "Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift," *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ U.S. Central Command, "U.S. Central Command Statement on the Realignment of the State of Israel," September 1, 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Judah Ari Gross, "IDF liaison sets up shop in US CENTCOM offices in Florida, solidifying move," *The Times of Israel*, October 29, 2021.

¹⁵¹ "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>.

¹⁵² Arie Egozi, "Amid attacks, UAE quietly asks Israel about defense systems: Sources," *Breaking Defense*, January 25, 2022.

¹⁵³ 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.

contemplating more defense and defense technology sales.¹⁵⁴ In late 2022, Israel's defense ministry estimated that its deals with the three countries were worth \$3 billion.¹⁵⁵

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.¹⁵⁶ Speculation about specific measures has continued since then.¹⁵⁷ In January 2023, the Department of Homeland Security publicized its efforts to help expand U.S.-Israel-UAE cooperation on cybersecurity to Bahrain and Morocco.¹⁵⁸

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."¹⁵⁹ Actions by this Israeli government may be fueling any such reluctance to some degree.¹⁶⁰ Regional countries might be hesitant to share the real-time intelligence data that underlies less sensitive basic threat information.¹⁶¹ 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 stationed in Israel, ship-borne Aegis combat systems, and existing air defense systems and fighter jets.¹⁶² Additionally, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) is reportedly working with Israel and some Arab states to develop a network of unmanned maritime drones to monitor Iranian naval activity and narcotics smuggling in NAVCENT's area of responsibility.¹⁶³

Selected congressional actions. In January 2022, some Members of the Senate and House formed bipartisan caucuses to promote the Abraham Accords.¹⁶⁴ In March, Congress enacted the Israel Relations Normalization Act of 2022 (IRNA, Division Z of P.L. 117-103). Among other things, the IRNA required 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

¹⁵⁴ 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.

¹⁵⁵ Nissenbaum, "Accords Benefit Israel's Defense Industry."

¹⁵⁶ "Israel reportedly working on air defense pact with regional allies," *Times of Israel*, March 29, 2022.

¹⁵⁷ 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.

¹⁵⁸ Department of Homeland Security, "DHS Expands Abraham Accords to Cybersecurity," February 2, 2023; Tim Starks and Ellen Nakashima, "The Abraham Accords expand with cybersecurity collaboration," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2023.

¹⁵⁹ 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.

¹⁶⁰ "UAE, Jordan consider reducing diplomacy with Israel – report," *Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2023.

¹⁶¹ Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, "Biden wants a Middle East air defense 'alliance.' But it's a long way off," *Politico*, July 12, 2022.

¹⁶² Anshel Pfeffer, "How Israel and Saudi Arabia Plan to Down Iranian Drones Together," *Haaretz*, July 13, 2022.

¹⁶³ Dion Nissenbaum, "Inside a U.S. Navy Maritime Drone Operation Aimed at Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ For more information, see <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Senate%20Abraham%20Accords%20Caucus%20Mission%20Statement.pdf>.

measures within Arab League states that legally or practically restrict or discourage normalization efforts with Israel or domestic support for such efforts.

The FY2023 James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 117-263) enacted in December 2022 included a provision requiring the Secretary of Defense (in consultation with the Secretary of State) to submit to foreign affairs and intelligence committees, within 180 days of enactment:

a strategy on cooperation with allies and partners in the area of responsibility of the United States Central Command to implement a multinational integrated air and missile defense architecture to protect the people, infrastructure, and territory of such countries from cruise and ballistic missiles, manned and unmanned aerial systems, and rocket attacks from Iran and groups linked to Iran.

Some Members have introduced legislation in the 118th Congress aimed at strengthening the Abraham Accords, including:

- H.R. 3099, which seeks to amend the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956 to establish the position of “Special Envoy for the Abraham Accords.” The House passed the bill in June 2023.
- H.R. 2973/S. 1334, which seeks to require the Administration to submit a strategy to some congressional committees for greater regional maritime and interdiction cooperation to counter Iranian and Iran-related naval capabilities and threats to lawful commerce.
- H.R. 3792, which, among other things, encourages U.S. officials to use three existing regional or global programs—the Middle East Partnership Initiative, Middle East Research Cooperation, and the International Visitor Leadership Program—to fund activities to expand and deepen the Accords.¹⁶⁵

Countering Iran¹⁶⁶

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 UAE through coordinated drone and missile attacks have implications for Israeli security calculations.¹⁶⁷ 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.”¹⁶⁸

As mentioned above, the IDF’s Military Intelligence directorate reportedly warned Israeli officials in early 2023 that the “anti-Israeli axis led by Iran”—including Hezbollah and Hamas—appears to be emboldened by Israeli domestic discord and some purported U.S.-Israel

¹⁶⁵ U.S. Congressman Joe Wilson, “Wilson, Phillips, McCaul, Meeks, Baird, Allred Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Expand Abraham Accords,” June 2, 2023.

¹⁶⁶ See also CRS Report R47321, *Iran: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Carla E. Humud and Clayton Thomas.

¹⁶⁷ 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.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, Seth J. Frantzman, “Iran and Hezbollah analyze Israel’s ‘war between the wars,’” *Jerusalem Post*, November 14, 2021.

differences.¹⁶⁹ According to one media report's profile of the intelligence warning, Iran doubts that Israel can "carry out an offensive against it or strike its nuclear program with US support."¹⁷⁰ Another media report said that Iran and its allies are not "necessarily interested in a direct, all-out clash," but are "willing to risk more daring offensive operations," while arguing that closer U.S.-Israel security coordination may at least partly reflect a pragmatic U.S. desire to prevent being dragged into a confrontation with Iran.¹⁷¹ This same report surmised that Iran may calculate it has bolstered its position vis-à-vis Israel and the United States because Iran and the Syrian regime have improved their relations with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab governments, Iran is approaching "nuclear threshold state" status, and Iran has a growing partnership with Russia.

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). 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.¹⁷² 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.¹⁷³ In June 2022, then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett characterized some operations inside Iran as targeting the "head of the octopus" to counter a range of Iranian military capabilities.¹⁷⁴

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.¹⁷⁵ Given various developments starting in 2022, including unrest and government crackdowns in Iran and Iranian material support for Russian military operations in Ukraine, near-term prospects for a renewed or revised JCPOA appear to have diminished.¹⁷⁶

During President Biden's trip to Israel in July 2022, he and then-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."¹⁷⁷ Additionally, Biden said that he would be willing to use force against Iran as a "last resort" to prevent it from

¹⁶⁹ Limor, "Exclusive: Intelligence Directorate sounds alarm over eroding Israeli deterrence."

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Amos Harel, "Washington's Mideast Pullout Sets Israel and Iran on a Collision Course," *Haaretz*, April 11, 2023.

¹⁷² Stephanie Liechtenstein, "UN report: Uranium particles enriched to 83.7% found in Iran," *Associated Press*, February 28, 2023.

¹⁷³ 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.

¹⁷⁴ Dion Nissenbaum et al., "Israel Widens Covert Actions to Rein in Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ "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.

¹⁷⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The dimming prospects of returning to a nuclear agreement with Iran*, November 2022.

¹⁷⁷ White House, "The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration," July 14, 2022.

acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁷⁸ In February 2023, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Thomas Nides said that the United States will not engage in negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program while Iran provides drones for Russia in its war in Ukraine. He also said that U.S.-Israel cooperation vis-à-vis Iran was “lockstep”:

As President Biden has said, we will not stand by and watch Iran get a nuclear weapon, number one. Number two, he said, all options are on the table. Number three, Israel can and should do whatever they need to deal with and we’ve got their back.¹⁷⁹

In January 2023, the United States and Israel held their largest-ever bilateral military exercise, named Juniper Oak. According to CENTCOM, the exercise “enhanced interoperability and the ability of CENTCOM forces to rapidly move combat power into the region,” and provides opportunities to incorporate lessons learned with all U.S. partners in the CENTCOM AOR.¹⁸⁰

Various sources have documented reported Israeli covert or military operations targeting Iran’s nuclear program,¹⁸¹ and some U.S. officials have reportedly differed with Israeli counterparts on the overall effectiveness of such operations.¹⁸² Even with reported upgrades to Israeli military capabilities,¹⁸³ questions apparently remain about military readiness for a major operation against Iran’s nuclear program.¹⁸⁴

In a January 2023 *CNN* interview, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel has conducted attacks on Iran aimed at thwarting its nuclear program and targeting “certain weapons development.” He also said, “I think the only way that you can stop a rogue state from getting nuclear weapons is a combination of crippling economic sanctions, but the most important thing is a credible military threat. And I would say this, if deterrence fails, you have no choice but to take action.”¹⁸⁵ Amid some international concerns about advanced levels of Iranian uranium enrichment, Defense Minister Gallant stated in February that Israel would not allow Iran to enrich uranium to 90%.¹⁸⁶

While an imminent return to the JCPOA may be unlikely, media reports emerged in June 2023 of indirect U.S.-Iran discussions aimed at a possible informal, unwritten understanding,¹⁸⁷ despite public statements by U.S. officials denying that a deal is in the offing. The reports say that such a U.S.-Iran arrangement might feature various elements, including:

¹⁷⁸ “Biden delivers tough talk on Iran as he opens Mideast visit,” *Associated Press*, July 15, 2022.

¹⁷⁹ Carrie Keller-Lynn, “US envoy Nides: Israel ‘can do whatever they need’ on Iran, ‘and we’ve got their back,’” *Times of Israel*, February 19, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ U.S. Central Command, “Completion of Juniper Oak 23.2 Exercise,” January 26, 2023. See also Michael Eisenstadt, “The Juniper Oak Military Exercise: Implications for Innovation, Experimentation, and U.S. Policy Toward Iran,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 1, 2023.

¹⁸¹ “Iran foils Israel-linked ‘sabotage’ plot at nuclear plant,” *Agence France Presse*, March 15, 2022.

¹⁸² David E. Sanger et al., “Israeli Attacks Spur Upgrade of Iran Sites,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2021.

¹⁸³ Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Israel’s ‘Top Gun’: The US-Israeli aircraft that can take down Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 25, 2023.

¹⁸⁴ Ethan Bronner and Henry Meyer, “Will Israel Attack Iran? What to Know About Netanyahu’s Military Posturing,” *Bloomberg*, June 13, 2023; Yossi Melman, “Israel Has No Realistic Military Option on Iran,” *Haaretz*, September 1, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Transcript: One-On-One with Israel’s Netanyahu amid Surging Violence.

¹⁸⁶ “Netanyahu said to huddle repeatedly with military brass over possible attack on Iran,” *Times of Israel*, February 22, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Crowley et al., “U.S. and Iran Quietly Discussing a Deal to Ease Nuclear Tensions,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2023; Laurence Norman and David S. Cloud, “U.S. Begins Quiet Push to Reduce Tensions with Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2023.

- Iranian agreement not to enrich uranium beyond 60%, and to release three Iranian-American prisoners; and
- U.S. agreement not to tighten sanctions, and to unfreeze billions of dollars in Iranian funds held abroad for Iran to use for humanitarian purposes.¹⁸⁸

Netanyahu has reportedly indicated to members of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Israel “could live with” such a U.S.-Iran understanding,¹⁸⁹ though on June 13 he said:

Our position is clear: No agreement with Iran will be binding on Israel, which will continue to do everything to defend itself. Our opposition to a return to the original agreement, I think it is working, but there are still differences of outlook and we do not hide them, also about smaller agreements.¹⁹⁰

Some unnamed Israeli senior officials have been cited as speculating that the Biden Administration may seek a more informal understanding with Iran because of concerns about potential congressional opposition to a formal agreement, though a source close to the Administration has expressed that President Biden is more “a creature of Congress” than most presidents.¹⁹¹

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.¹⁹² Speculation persists about the potential for wider conflict and its implications, including from incursions into Israeli airspace by Hezbollah drones.¹⁹³

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.¹⁹⁴ 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.¹⁹⁵ In late 2022, Israeli officials reportedly warned Lebanon that Israel could strike the Beirut airport if it serves as a destination for weapons smuggling,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ “Report: Netanyahu says US and Iran in talks for a ‘mini-deal’ Israel can live with,” *Times of Israel*, June 13, 2023.

¹⁹⁰ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee: ‘No agreement with Iran will be binding on Israel, which will continue to do everything to defend itself,’” June 13, 2023.

¹⁹¹ Amir Tibon and Ben Samuels, “Israeli Officials Believe U.S. Will Avoid Calling New Iran Understandings an ‘Agreement,’” *Haaretz*, June 13, 2023.

¹⁹² CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*; CRS In Focus IF10703, *Lebanese Hezbollah*.

¹⁹³ Neville Teller, “Hezbollah is as big a threat to Israel as Iran’s nuclear program – opinion,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 28, 2022; Orna Mizrahi and Yoram Schweitzer, “Hezbollah’s Efforts to Restore its Domestic Standing: The Israeli Card,” Institute for National Security Studies, March 9, 2022.

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, “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.

¹⁹⁵ “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.

based on reports that Iran has planned flights that could carry equipment directly to Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁹⁶

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.¹⁹⁷

Russia has reportedly shown some capacity to thwart Israeli airstrikes against Iranian or Syrian targets,¹⁹⁸ but has generally refrained via a deconfliction mechanism with Israel.¹⁹⁹ This deconfliction has apparently continued to date even with Russia's war on Ukraine, but Russia has criticized some Israeli strikes.²⁰⁰

In October 2022, Israel, Lebanon, and the United States resolved a long-standing maritime boundary dispute, with potential implications for Israel-Hezbollah conflict (see **Appendix C**). Public debate in Israel centered on whether the economic benefits from the deal were worth the concessions and the possible emboldening of Hezbollah.²⁰¹ While Prime Minister Netanyahu made a statement before taking office again about "neutralizing" (rather than canceling) the maritime boundary agreement,²⁰² his government has not taken action to date.²⁰³

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 46,000 Jewish and non-Jewish refugees to enter Israel—without alienating Russia.²⁰⁴ 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.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁶ Ben Caspit, "Israel could strike in Lebanon if Iran renews weapons smuggling," *Al-Monitor*, December 16, 2022.

¹⁹⁷ Anna Ahronheim, "Thousands of airstrikes carried out by Israel in past five years," *Jerusalem Post*, March 29, 2022.

¹⁹⁸ Arie Egozi, "Israel Shifts to Standoff Weapons in Syria as Russian Threats Increase," *Breaking Defense*, July 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Jacob Magid, "Russia says military coordination with Israel in Syria will continue as usual," *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2022.

²⁰⁰ Anna Ahronheim, "Israel to increase military, civilian aid to Ukraine – report," *Jerusalem Post*, May 4, 2022; Emanuel Fabian, "Shuttering Damascus airport, Israel ramps up its efforts to foil Iran arms transfers," *Times of Israel*, June 12, 2022.

²⁰¹ Isabel Kershner, "Israel and Lebanon Sign Deal on Maritime Border," *New York Times*, October 28, 2022.

²⁰² Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Netanyahu says Ben Gvir could be police minister, vows to 'neutralize' Lebanon deal," *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2022.

²⁰³ Seth J. Frantzman, "Qatar swoops into Lebanon gas deal in wake of Jerusalem-Beirut agreement," *Jerusalem Post*, January 31, 2023.

²⁰⁴ Bret Stephens, "Naftali Bennett's Exit Interview," *New York Times*, June 21, 2022; Bar Peleg, "Israel to Bar Ukrainians Arriving Since October from Working," *Haaretz*, December 28, 2022. About 14,000 Ukrainians who entered Israel after the invasion remained as of December 2022. Additionally, about 26,000 Russian Jews had entered Israel in 2022 as of October. Bethan McKernan and Quique Kierszenbaum, "'It's driven by fear': Ukrainians and Russians with Jewish roots flee to Israel," *Guardian*, October 16, 2022.

²⁰⁵ Transcript: One-On-One with Israel's Netanyahu amid Surging Violence; Zev Chafets, "Why Israel Won't Supply the Iron Dome to Ukraine," *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2022.

Despite entreaties from U.S. and Ukrainian officials, Israel has shown reluctance to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine.²⁰⁶ Starting in May 2022, Israel has sent some protective gear to Ukrainian rescue forces and civilian organizations.²⁰⁷

Once Russia began using Iran-made drones in Ukraine, Israel offered to help Ukraine develop an early-warning system for its civilians, and also began sharing basic intelligence with Ukraine aimed at helping its forces counter drone attacks.²⁰⁸ In November 2022, one news outlet reported that Israel had funded the purchase of “strategic materials” by a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, which then transferred the materials to Ukraine for its use.²⁰⁹

In 2022 and 2023, the United States reportedly withdrew 300,000 155-millimeter artillery shells from War Reserve Stocks for Allies stockpiles in Israel to send to Ukraine.²¹⁰ According to multiple reports, Israeli officials acceded to the Pentagon’s request in order to avoid confrontation with the United States and because, according to one Israeli official, “it’s their ammunition and they don’t really need our permission to take it.”²¹¹

In early 2023, Israel reportedly approved export licenses for the possible sale of anti-drone jamming systems that could help Ukraine down drones. Israeli officials have claimed that this step does not change Israel’s policy against providing lethal assistance because the systems are defensive in nature and do not target Russian soldiers. While Ukrainian officials appear interested in the systems, they view them as less critical than air defense systems that can counter ballistic missiles.²¹²

In July 2022, Russia’s Justice Ministry signaled to Israel that it was 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 claimed that the agency violated privacy laws by storing personal information about emigration applicants, but many Israelis suspected that Russian concerns about Israeli policy on Ukraine and possibly Syria and Jerusalem may have motivated the pending legal action.²¹³ As of early 2023, the agency had reportedly frozen most activities related to promoting Jewish emigration to Israel from former Soviet Union countries (except Ukraine).²¹⁴

²⁰⁶ Arie Egozi, “As Iranian munitions kill in Ukraine, pressure builds for Israel to reassess its Russian balancing act,” *Breaking Defense*, October 18, 2022.

²⁰⁷ “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.

²⁰⁸ “Israel offers help with air-attack alerts, but Ukraine wants interceptors,” *Reuters*, October 19, 2022; “Israel giving intel on Russia’s Iranian drones to Ukraine – report,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 24, 2022.

²⁰⁹ Yossi Melman, “Under U.S. Pressure, Israel Funded ‘Strategic Materials’ for Ukraine,” *Haaretz*, November 17, 2022.

²¹⁰ Eric Schmitt, et al., “Pentagon Sends U.S. Arms Stored in Israel to Ukraine,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2023.

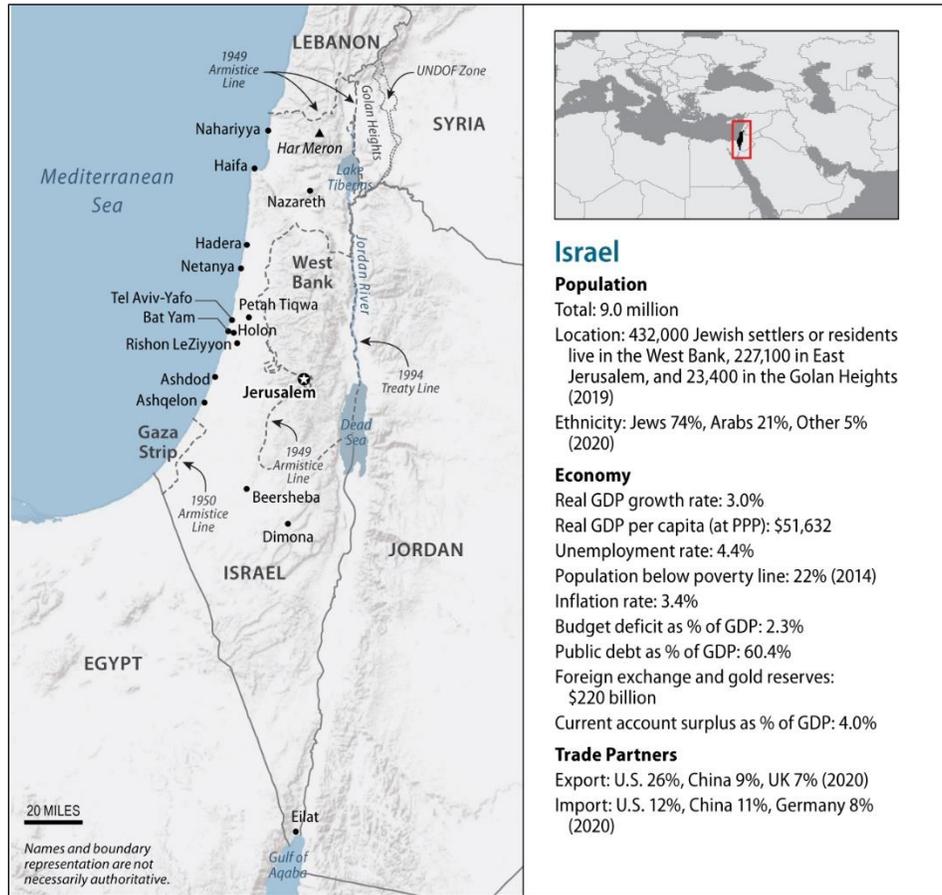
²¹¹ Barak Ravid, “U.S. sends weapons stored in Israel to Ukraine,” *Axios*, January 18, 2023.

²¹² Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Israel approves export licenses for anti-drone systems for Ukraine,” *Axios*, March 15, 2023.

²¹³ Anton Troianovski and Isabel Kershner, “Russia Moves to Shut Down Agency Handling Emigration to Israel,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2022.

²¹⁴ Zvika Klein, “Jewish Agency lowers profile in Russia, less activity in FSU countries – exclusive,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 21, 2023.

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 projections for 2023 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) – Coalition (32 Knesset seats)

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

Leader: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

Born in 1949, Netanyahu returned as Israel's prime minister in December 2022. Previously, he served as prime minister from 2009 to 2021, and also 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) – Opposition (12 seats)

Merger of centrist Blue and White (led by Benny Gantz) and right-of-center New Hope (led by Gideon Sa'ar) parties. Seeks to draw contrasts with 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. Varying views on Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Leader: Benny Gantz

Born in 1959, Gantz served as chief of general staff of the Israel Defense Forces from 2011 to 2015. He then served as defense minister from 2020 to 2022.



Religious Zionism (HaTzionut HaDatit) – Coalition (7 seats)

Ultra-nationalist party with focus on expanding settlements, supporting annexation of West Bank areas, and aligning Israeli societal practices with traditional Jewish religious law. Elected on a common slate with Jewish Power and Noam.

Leader: Bezalel Smotrich

Born in 1980, Smotrich is Israel's finance minister, as well as a minister within the defense ministry with some responsibilities over West Bank administration. He 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.



Jewish Power (Otzma Yehudit) – Coalition (6 seats)

Ultra-nationalist party with similar positions to Religious Zionism. Elected on a common slate with Religious Zionism and Noam.

Leader: Itamar Ben Gvir

Born in 1976, Ben Gvir is Israel's national security minister. He 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. Ben Gvir was convicted in 2007 for incitement to racism and supporting terrorism but says that he has moderated his positions and does not generalize about Arabs. He is a lawyer and has regularly represented Jewish nationalist activists. Ben Gvir has been a regular fixture at contentious gatherings of Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem.



Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home) – Opposition (6 seats)

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 has previously served as Israel's defense minister, foreign minister, and finance 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.



נעים

Noam (Pleasantness) – Coalition (1 seat)

Ultra-nationalist party with focus on traditional Jewish religious values on family issues (including opposition to LGBTQ rights), Sabbath day observance, and the conversion process. Elected on a common slate with Religious Zionism and Jewish Power.

Leader: Avi Maoz

Born in 1956, Maoz is a former civil servant who later turned to politics. He has headed Noam since its establishment in 2019. In the current government, he nominally headed an office in the prime minister’s office devoted to Jewish identity, but resigned from that post in February 2023 based on concerns that he was not given the authority to change policy as he desired.

LEFT



העבודה

Labor (Avoda) – Opposition (4 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.

Leader: Merav Michaeli

Born in 1966, Michaeli became Labor’s leader in 2020 and was first elected to the Knesset in 2013. She served as transportation minister in the 2021-2022 coalition. 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



יש עתיד

Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) – Opposition (24 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.

Leader: 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. He served as foreign minister and then prime minister in the 2021-2022 coalition.

ULTRA-ORTHODOX



Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians) – Coalition (11 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. As part of a plea deal for tax fraud in January 2022, Deri agreed to resign from the Knesset, but returned in the November 2022 election. In January 2023, Israel’s High Court of Justice ruled that he could not serve as interior and health minister in the current government because he had indicated in the 2022 plea deal that he would permanently leave politics.



יהדות התורה

United Torah Judaism – Coalition (7 seats)

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 Israel’s construction and housing minister. He has been 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.

ARAB



Hadash-Ta'al – Opposition (5 seats)

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) – Opposition (5 seats)

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 2021-2022 coalition 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 long-standing 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.²¹⁵

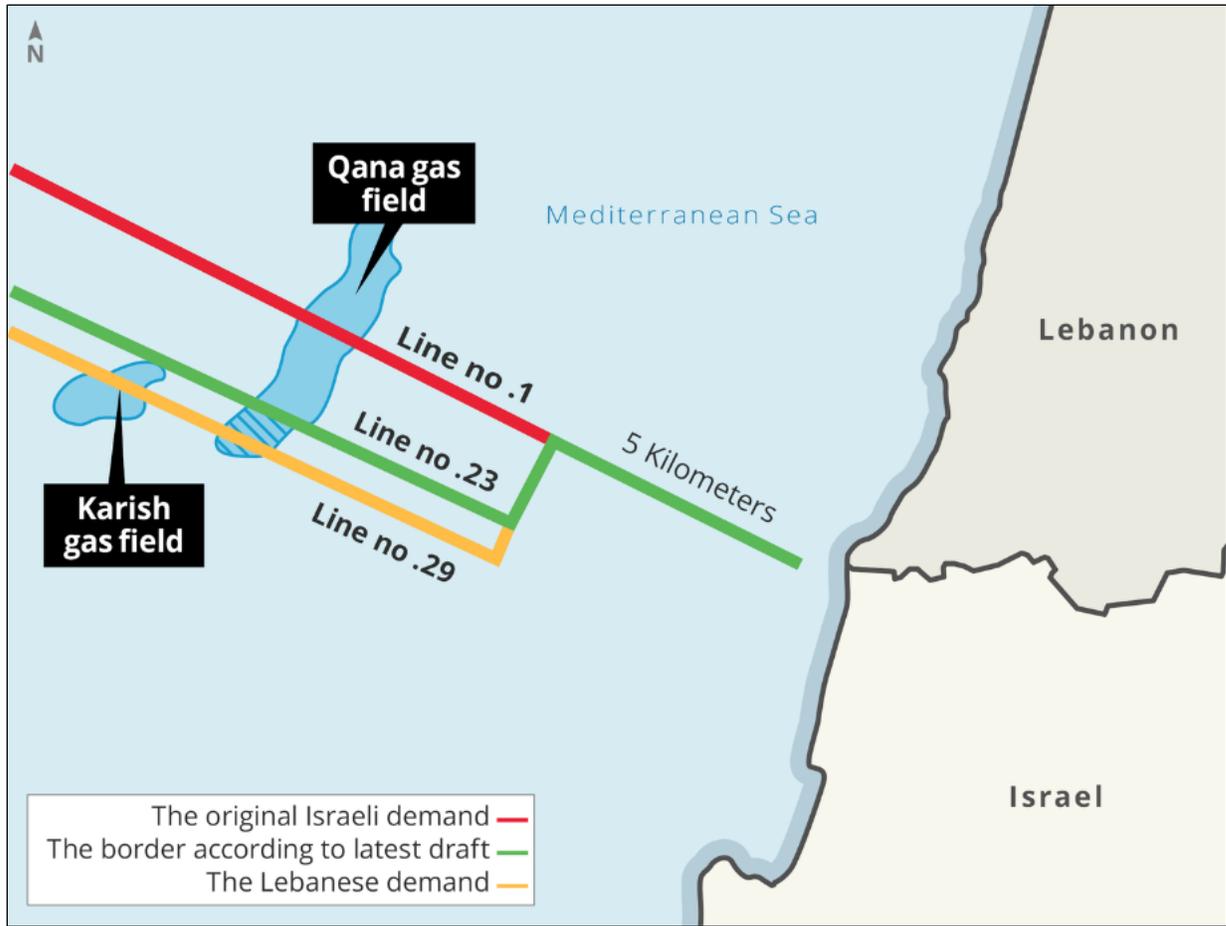
On October 27, the parties signed documents to begin implementation of the deal.²¹⁶ Reportedly, President Biden drafted a letter to Israel guaranteeing Israel's security and economic rights in the agreement and pledging to prevent Hezbollah from receiving any income from Lebanese natural gas drilling.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ White House, "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on the Israel-Lebanon Maritime Agreement," October 11, 2022.

²¹⁶ Lazar Berman, "Biden drafts letter guaranteeing Israel's rights in Lebanon maritime deal," *Times of Israel*, October 29, 2022.

²¹⁷ 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.²¹⁸

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.

²¹⁸ Lazar Berman, “Israeli official: Development of disputed Qana gas field will take four stages,” *Times of Israel*, October 12, 2022.

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