

# 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's December 2022 return to power and new coalition partners.** In December 2022, Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister of a new government, replacing a 2021-2022 coalition that had formed in opposition to Netanyahu. He previously served as prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and 2009 to 2021. The November 2022 election was the fifth held in Israel since a legal process began in December 2018 addressing corruption allegations against Netanyahu. 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 its Arab citizens and with Palestinians, and its relations with the United States and other countries. 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, Netanyahu's government may pass a measure giving it considerable control over judicial appointments, but provide more time for dialogue on other aspects of its 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 counterterrorism measures and controversy, 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 Israeli normalization with Muslim-majority states.** The Biden Administration has followed agreements reached during the Trump Administration that normalized or improved relations between Israel and four Arab or Muslim-majority states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Biden Administration officials have said that any further U.S. efforts to assist Israeli normalization with Muslim-majority countries would seek to preserve the viability of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 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—that inclines other Arab and Muslim-majority countries toward future normalization with Israel. 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. Amid seemingly diminished prospects for a possible U.S. return to the agreement, Israeli leaders seek greater international pressure on Iran. Observers have speculated about Israeli covert or military actions to influence nuclear diplomacy and Iran's program. Israel also has reportedly conducted a number of military operations against Iran and its allies in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq due to its concerns about Iran's presence in these areas and Lebanese Hezbollah's missile arsenal. Via U.S. mediation, Israel and Lebanon—which do not have formal relations—reached agreement in October 2022 on maritime boundaries to allow both countries to extract offshore natural gas.

**Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.** In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Israel has sought to provide political support for Ukraine and humanitarian relief for Ukrainians without alienating Russia. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

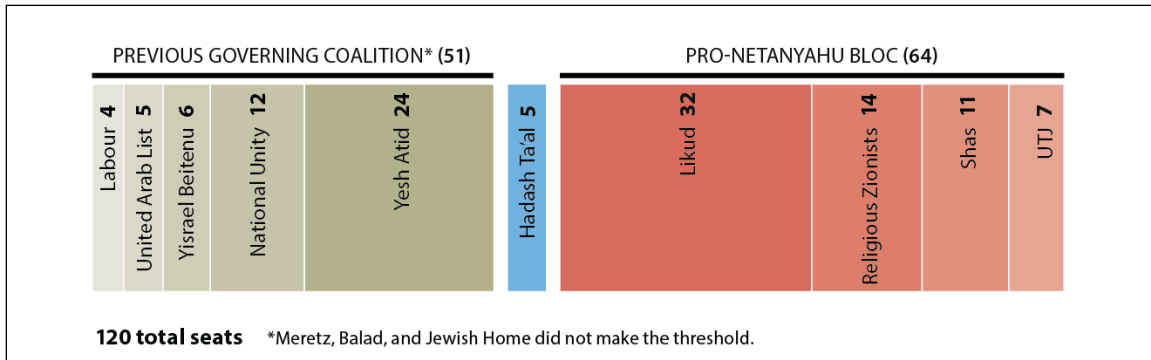
- The December 2022 return of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel’s prime minister at the head of a coalition government that includes ministers from ultra-nationalist parties. The new government’s judicial reform proposal has triggered a highly charged national debate in Israel that has prompted public statements of support by President Biden and some Members of Congress for compromise measures.
- Israeli-Palestinian violence and other problems, and their implications for U.S. policy.
- 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.

## 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**).

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Two-State Solution Act (H.R. 5344 from the 117<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup> Coalition agreements state that the Jewish people have an "exclusive right" to the land between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Ben Gvir expresses many similar views and has been a fixture at contentious gatherings of Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> An Israeli court convicted him in 2007 for incitement to racism and supporting terrorism.<sup>8</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>8</sup> Etgar Lefkovits, "Ben-Gvir convicted of inciting to racism," *Jerusalem Post*, June 25, 2007.

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

**Table 1. Israeli Government: Key Positions**

Position	Name	Party
Prime Minister	Benjamin Netanyahu	Likud
Defense Minister	Yoav Galant	Likud
Foreign Minister	Eli Cohen	Likud
Finance Minister and Minister within Defense Ministry	Bezalel 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 are each in the process of assuming 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.<sup>11</sup> Ben Gvir heads a national security ministry with general authority over Israel’s police—including personnel that patrol Jerusalem and its disputed holy sites.<sup>12</sup> He also expects to oversee the border police, including units that have operated in the West Bank under Israel Defense Forces (IDF) authority.<sup>13</sup> Ben Gvir supports easing open-fire conditions for security forces and increasing their legal immunity.<sup>14</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>12</sup> 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.

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

<sup>14</sup> Keller-Lynn, “Knesset passes ‘Ben Gvir law.’”

<sup>15</sup> 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.

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

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

Netanyahu has asserted that he will personally retain ultimate responsibility for policy.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> Two former U.S. officials have written that if a new Israeli government with Smotrich and Ben Gvir features open hostility to Arabs and illiberal measures to change Israel's democracy, opponents of strong U.S.-Israel relations will exploit the situation "to try to undo aspects of the relationship, and certainly to challenge Israeli military requests."<sup>19</sup>

The coalition agreements are not legally binding.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

## Proposed Judicial System Changes

Justice Minister Yariv Levin proposed legislation in January 2023 to overhaul Israel's judicial system in the following ways:<sup>23</sup>

- 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 greater control of the panel that selects judges.
- 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.<sup>24</sup> It is unclear whether Prime Minister Netanyahu can participate in the

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<sup>17</sup> Steve Inskeep and Daniel Estrin, "'They are joining me. I'm not joining them': Netanyahu defends far-right allies," *NPR*, December 15, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Caspit, "Crisis imminent as Netanyahu's far-right partners set to govern West Bank," *Al-Monitor*, December 9, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, "A narrow government with Ben Gvir and Smotrich threatens US-Israel ties," *Times of Israel*, November 2, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Barak Ravid, "Israel swears in most right-wing government in its history," *Axios*, December 29, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> "Netanyahu agrees to amend Law of Return in coalition deal with UTJ," *Associated Press*, December 28, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Sharon, "Justice minister unveils plan to shackle the High Court, overhaul Israel's judiciary," *Times of Israel*, January 4, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Dov Lieber, "Israel's Court Plan Deepens Divisions," *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2023; "Israel unveils



legislative process for the judicial reform proposal because of an existing conflict of interest agreement barring him from matters that could affect his criminal case.<sup>25</sup>

The proposal has triggered a highly charged national debate over checks and balances in Israel. Since its announcement, hundreds of thousands of Israelis have joined protests in conjunction with opposition politicians,<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> As widespread opposition to the proposal has continued for more than two months, it 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 Herzi 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.”<sup>29</sup>

Netanyahu has defended the need for reform—including by arguing 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.<sup>30</sup> More than 150 North American law professors with varying views on whether the HCJ should face more checks have signed a statement expressing worry that the speed and scale of the proposed reforms could weaken the independence of the judiciary, the separation of powers and the rule of law.<sup>31</sup> HCJ President Esther Hayut has said that the HCJ intends to examine any legislation enacted, raising the possibility of a constitutional crisis if the HCJ rules that the legislation is invalid.<sup>32</sup>

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

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controversial plans to overhaul judicial system,” *Associated Press*, January 4, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> “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,” *Ha’aretz*, January 26, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Tamar Uriel-Beeri, “Former Israel A-Gs on reforms: ‘They threaten to destroy judicial system,’” *Jerusalem Post*, January 12, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Neri Zilber, “Will Less Democracy Kill Israel’s Tech Sector?” *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Neri Zilber, “Netanyahu Holds the Key to De-escalating Israel’s Crisis,” *Newlines Magazine*, March 16, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> “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.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Starr, “Over 150 US law professors sign statement opposing judicial reform,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> David Horovitz, “Constitutional crisis looms, as Supreme Court president shows she won’t go quietly,” *Times of Israel*, January 12, 2023.



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.”<sup>33</sup>

Polls suggest that a majority of Israelis may support some form of judicial reform, but the specific reforms introduced by the government 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> Netanyahu has rejected Herzog’s proposal, with the issue of judicial appointments reportedly a sticking point, but Netanyahu and some other figures that generally support the government’s initial proposal have hinted that they remain willing to consider a deal.<sup>36</sup>

During Secretary of State Blinken’s January 2023 visit to Israel, he said (in remarks alongside Netanyahu) that both America and Israel support “core democratic principles and institutions, including respect for human rights, the equal administration of justice for all, the equal rights of minority groups, the rule of law, free press, a robust civil society.” He further said that “building consensus for new proposals is the most effective way to ensure they’re embraced and that they endure.”<sup>37</sup> A few days before Blinken’s visit, Netanyahu reportedly told visiting National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that any final legislation will reflect wide agreement and be softened from the version Justice Minister Levin introduced.<sup>38</sup>

As the debate has progressed, 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.<sup>39</sup> In February and March, a number of other Members voiced opinions. Some joined letters to President Biden or Israeli leaders—or made separate

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<sup>33</sup> Fabian, “Former defense legal adviser warns against planned government moves in West Bank.”

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> “Warning of civil war, Herzog unveils framework for judicial reform; PM rejects it,” *Times of Israel*, March 15, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu After Their Meeting,” January 30, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> “Netanyahu said to tell US nat’l security adviser judicial reform plan to be softened,” *Times of Israel*, January 22, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Representative Jerrold Nadler, “As the Most Senior Jewish Member of Congress, I Now Fear Deeply for the U.S.-Israel Relationship,” *Ha’aretz*, January 25, 2023; Representative Brad Sherman, interviewed in Ben Samuels, “Top pro-Israel Democrat Warns Netanyahu Government ‘Mistakes’ Could Erode U.S. Support,” *Ha’aretz*, January 23, 2023.

statements—expressing support for the principles of judicial review and minority rights.<sup>40</sup> Others stated confidence in Israelis to make their own democratic decisions.<sup>41</sup>

In March, President Biden called Prime Minister Netanyahu—according to an unnamed senior Administration official—to express concern about the judicial reform issue.<sup>42</sup> A White House readout of the call said that the President “offered support for efforts underway to forge a compromise” consistent with democratic values such as “genuine checks and balances” and “the broadest possible base of popular support.”<sup>43</sup>

After the Biden-Netanyahu call, the Israeli government announced that most of the judicial reform legislation would be postponed until the Knesset returns from a spring recess in late April, potentially allowing for dialogue among differing viewpoints on those issues. However, the government reportedly intends to pass a bill giving it a large amount of—though not total—control over judicial appointments before the Knesset recess begins on April 2.<sup>44</sup> Its announcement has elicited criticism from some government supporters as well as the opposition.<sup>45</sup>

## Israeli-Palestinian Issues<sup>46</sup>

### 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.<sup>47</sup> In doing so, they seek to help manage tensions, bolster Israel’s defensive capabilities, and strengthen U.S.-Palestinian ties that frayed during the Trump Administration.<sup>48</sup> These officials regularly speak out against steps taken by Israelis or Palestinians that could fuel violence and risk undermining the vision of two states.<sup>49</sup> In January 2023 remarks made alongside Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas during a visit to the West Bank, Secretary Blinken said:

<sup>40</sup> 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](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.

<sup>41</sup> Rod, “While some sound alarm, pro-Israel members call for measured approach on judicial reform.”

<sup>42</sup> “Biden calls Israel’s Netanyahu to express judicial plan ‘concern,’” *Associated Press*, March 19, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel,” March 19, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> 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.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “Israeli Leaders Plan to Start Judicial Overhaul by April, Stoking Anger,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> See also CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

<sup>49</sup> 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.

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.<sup>50</sup>

### 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.<sup>51</sup>

Israel's previous government took some steps to improve Palestinians' economic and living circumstances, including through loans and work permits.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> Some countries (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."<sup>56</sup>

In early 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

<sup>50</sup> State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas After Their Meeting," January 31, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Niels Lesniewski, "White House confirms Biden will keep embassy in Jerusalem," *Roll Call*, February 9, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> 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.

<sup>53</sup> Neri Zilber, "Israel's new plan is to 'shrink,' not solve, the Palestinian conflict," *CNN*, September 16, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> 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.

<sup>55</sup> "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.

<sup>56</sup> Luke Tress, "Over 90 countries urge Israel to lift sanctions put on Palestinians after UN vote," *Times of Israel*, January 17, 2023.

globally.<sup>57</sup> Netanyahu has pledged to maintain the historic “status quo” that allows only Muslims to worship at the holy site, and has downplayed Ben Gvir’s visit by referring to previous ministerial visits to the site.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup>

### 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup>

## Israel-West Bank Violence

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,<sup>67</sup> violence has

<sup>57</sup> 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.

<sup>58</sup> 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.

<sup>59</sup> State Department Press Briefing, January 3, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> “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.

<sup>61</sup> CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

<sup>62</sup> 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.

<sup>63</sup> David Makovsky, “Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 25, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Aaron Boxerman, “UN to begin dispensing Qatari cash to needy Gazan families Monday under new deal,” *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Yaniv Kubovich, “Egypt, Qatar Reach Breakthrough on Hamas Civil Servants Salaries,” *haaretz.com*, November 29, 2021; Abu Amer, “Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas.”

<sup>67</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “As Violence Rages, New Israeli Alliance Risks Fueling Even More of It,” *New York Times*,

spiked in early 2023. For this year as of mid-March, at least 15 Israelis and 87 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.<sup>68</sup> In late February, Palestinian gunmen shot and killed two Israeli settlers passing through the village of Huwara, triggering retaliatory attacks by dozens of settlers that killed one Palestinian and injured more than 300, and burned around 30 homes and 100 cars in the village.<sup>69</sup> Amid negative U.S. and international reactions to the retaliatory attacks, Netanyahu and several other officials criticized them. Finance Minister Smotrich appealed to settlers to leave the response to Palestinian violence to the government, and then called for the government to “wipe out” Huwara. After receiving heavy U.S. and international condemnation for the statement, he expressed regret and insisted it was not intended literally.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup> As the increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence has attracted greater U.S. policy attention,<sup>72</sup> Israeli and PA forces have approached West Bank militants in different ways, leading to some tensions and the possibility of future escalation.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>

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.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup>

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January 29, 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Aaron Boxerman and Dov Lieber, “Israel Reverses Settlement Policy,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2023; Aaron Boxerman, “Violence Flares in West Bank as Summit Seeks Calm,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> “‘They burned everything’: Israeli settlers torch Palestinian homes, cars after West Bank attack,” *Agence France Presse*, February 27, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> State Department Press Briefing, March 1, 2023; Omri Nahmias and Tovah Lazaroff, “Smotrich walks back Huwara comments during US visit,” March 13, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Isabel Kershner, “Palestinian Assailant Kills Three Israelis in the West Bank,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> 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.

<sup>73</sup> 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.

<sup>74</sup> Ahmad Melhem, “Palestinian security forces become more involved in resistance in West Bank,” *Al-Monitor*, October 12, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Lieber et al., “Israeli-Palestinian Violence Grows”; Abdulrahim, “Palestinian Is Shot Dead Outside Israeli Settlement in West Bank.”

<sup>76</sup> Transcript: One-On-One with Israel’s Netanyahu amid Surging Violence.



After a deadly January Israeli raid in Jenin, the PA announced a suspension of security coordination with Israel,<sup>77</sup> but its practical meaning is unclear.<sup>78</sup> Previously, the PA publicly suspended security coordination with Israel for a few months in 2020 when Israel was contemplating annexation of West Bank areas.<sup>79</sup> In early 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.<sup>80</sup> 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).<sup>81</sup> 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*.<sup>82</sup>

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.”<sup>83</sup> He also said that he discussed with President Abbas “the importance of the Palestinian Authority itself continuing to improve its governance and accountability, strengthening the institutions of the PA.”<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup>

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.<sup>87</sup> Over the next week, U.S.-brokered diplomacy reportedly averted a Palestinian-supported U.N. Security Council (UNSC) draft resolution condemning the Israeli action.<sup>88</sup> Instead, the UNSC issued a presidential statement that expressed deep concern and

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<sup>77</sup> “In light of the massacre in Jenin, Palestinian leadership declares end to security coordination with Israel,” *Wafa News Agency*, January 26, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> 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.

<sup>79</sup> “Palestinian Authority resuming cooperation with Israel, Palestinian official says,” *Reuters*, November 17, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Jacob Magid, “CIA director: Current Israeli-Palestinian tensions resemble Second Intifada,” *Times of Israel*, February 7, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Micah Halpern, “Terror wave in Israel not an *intifada*, but still very dangerous – opinion,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 28, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas After Their Meeting.”

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> 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.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> State Department, “Israeli Settlement and Outpost Legalization Announcement,”

<sup>88</sup> Michelle Nichols, “No U.N. vote Monday on Israel settlements, diplomats say,” *Reuters*, February 19, 2023; Barak

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.<sup>89</sup>

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.<sup>90</sup> 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, establish a separate mechanism to improve Palestinian economic conditions, and resume talks in April.<sup>91</sup> Reportedly, the PA agreed in February to start implementing the USSC security plan,<sup>92</sup> 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.”<sup>93</sup>

On March 20, 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 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 the commitments it made earlier in the month to de-escalate Israeli-Palestinian tensions.<sup>94</sup> 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,<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup>

## The Abraham Accords

In late 2020 and early 2021, Israel reached agreements to normalize or improve its relations with four members of the Arab League: the 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.<sup>97</sup> In 2021, Israel opened embassies in the UAE and Bahrain, and both countries

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

<sup>89</sup> U.N. Security Council, Statement by the President of the Security Council (S/PRST/2023/1), February 20, 2023.

<sup>90</sup> State Department, “Aqaba Joint Communique,” February 26, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> State Department, “Joint Communique from the March 19 meeting in Sharm El Sheikh,” March 19, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Barak Ravid, “Israeli-Palestinian showdown at UN averted after U.S. mediation,” *Axios*, February 19, 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Yoni Ben Menachem, “American-Israeli Military Coordination and the Possibility of Regional Escalation,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, March 9, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> State Department Press Briefing, March 21, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> State Department, “Deputy Secretary Sherman’s Meeting with Israeli Ambassador to the United States Herzog,” March 21, 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “Prime Minister’s Office Statement on the Knesset Decision to Repeal Parts of the Disengagement Law,” March 22, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> 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



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 not normalized its relations with Israel, it reportedly supported the UAE and Bahrain in their decisions to join the Abraham Accords.<sup>98</sup> 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.<sup>99</sup> In January 2023, the Sudanese military leadership said that Sudan would sign a normalization deal with Israel after it transitions to a civilian government, but some Sudanese civilian groups reportedly remain unsure about this step.<sup>100</sup>

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 was ratified in December 2022, 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 Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid and the foreign ministers of the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt at a March 2022 summit in Israel's southern Negev desert 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.<sup>101</sup> Participants expect a 2023 foreign ministerial meeting to take place in Morocco.

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.<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

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 Israel in the years ahead."<sup>105</sup> However, the Biden Administration's willingness to offer major U.S. policy inducements to countries in connection with normalization efforts remains unclear.<sup>106</sup> The

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agreement to recognize Israel.

<sup>98</sup> Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Jake Sullivan discussed Saudi-Israel normalization with MBS," *Axios*, October 20, 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Testimony of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee, "Sudan's Imperiled Transition: U.S. Policy in the Wake of the October 25<sup>th</sup> Coup," Senate Foreign Relations Committee, hearing, February 1, 2022.

<sup>100</sup> "Israel, Sudan announce deal to normalise relations," *Reuters*, February 3, 2023.

<sup>101</sup> 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.

<sup>102</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *2022 Arab Opinion Index*, January 3, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> 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.

<sup>104</sup> Kassin and Pollock, "Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords."

<sup>105</sup> 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.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Koplow et al., "Biden has an opportunity to put his own stamp on Arab-Israeli relations," *The Hill*, October 14, 2021.

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.<sup>107</sup> Negev Forum members acknowledge that part of their mandate is to “create momentum in Israeli-Palestinian relations.”<sup>108</sup> 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.<sup>109</sup> Jordan also has remained on the sidelines of the Negev Forum, conditioning its involvement on PA participation.<sup>110</sup>

In January 2023, Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud expressed general support for normalization with Israel but stated 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.”<sup>111</sup> 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, and Arab concerns regarding increased Israeli-Palestinian tensions and violence.<sup>112</sup> 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.”<sup>113</sup>

**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.<sup>114</sup> Israel had previously been under the purview of U.S. European Command. CENTCOM formalized Israel’s move in September 2021,<sup>115</sup> and in October an Israeli Defense Forces liaison was stationed at CENTCOM headquarters.<sup>116</sup> Since then, Israel has joined military exercises with the United States and the

<sup>107</sup> State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after Their Meeting,” January 30, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> The Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework Adopted by the Steering Committee on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022, hyperlink to document available at <https://www.state.gov/the-negev-forum-working-groups-and-regional-cooperation-framework/>.

<sup>109</sup> Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, “Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal,” *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

<sup>110</sup> Jacob Magid, “US laments Jordan’s absence from Negev Forum, aims to keep Palestinians in loop,” *Times of Israel*, January 8, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Marita Kassis, “Saudi FM says no normalizing ties with Israel before Palestinian issue resolved,” *Al-Monitor*, January 20, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “For Israel, Saudi Deal with Iran Undermines Its Hopes of Isolating Tehran,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2023; Dion Nissenbaum et al., “Saudis Seek Edge in Israel Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2023; David Makovsky, “Netanyahu’s Potential Friction Points with Biden (Part 2): Iran, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, and Domestic Issues,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 10, 2023.

<sup>113</sup> Kingsley, “For Israel, Saudi Deal with Iran Undermines Its Hopes of Isolating Tehran.”

<sup>114</sup> Jared Szuba, “Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift,” *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2021.

<sup>115</sup> U.S. Central Command, “U.S. Central Command Statement on the Realignment of the State of Israel,” September 1, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Judah Ari Gross, “IDF liaison sets up shop in US CENTCOM offices in Florida, solidifying move,” *The Times of Israel*, October 29, 2021.

other Abraham Accords states, as well as other CENTCOM partners such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, and Pakistan.<sup>117</sup>

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.<sup>118</sup> Earlier, both Morocco (November 2021) and Bahrain (February 2022) signed MOUs with Israel on security cooperation.<sup>119</sup> 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 contemplating more defense and defense technology sales.<sup>120</sup> In late 2022, Israel's defense ministry estimated that its deals with the three countries were worth \$3 billion.<sup>121</sup>

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.<sup>122</sup> Speculation about specific measures has continued since then.<sup>123</sup> 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.<sup>124</sup>

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."<sup>125</sup> One obstacle could be the apparent reluctance of countries in the region to share the real-time intelligence data that underlies basic threat information that they might be more willing to share.<sup>126</sup> 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

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<sup>117</sup> "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>.

<sup>118</sup> Arie Egozi, "Amid attacks, UAE quietly asks Israel about defense systems: Sources," *Breaking Defense*, January 25, 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Ben Caspit, "Gantz says Israel, Morocco 'leap together' in historic agreement," *Al-Monitor*, November 26, 2021; Rina Bassist, "Israel signs security cooperation agreement with Bahrain," *Al-Monitor*, February 3, 2022. During the same visit in which Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz signed the MOU with Bahrain, he and Bahrain's defense minister made a public visit to the U.S. Navy's 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet base there to emphasize the level of collaboration among all parties involved.

<sup>120</sup> 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.

<sup>121</sup> Nissenbaum, "Accords Benefit Israel's Defense Industry."

<sup>122</sup> "Israel reportedly working on air defense pact with regional allies," *Times of Israel*, March 29, 2022.

<sup>123</sup> 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.

<sup>124</sup> 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.

<sup>125</sup> 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.

<sup>126</sup> Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, "Biden wants a Middle East air defense 'alliance.' But it's a long way off," *Politico*, July 12, 2022.

fighter jets.<sup>127</sup> 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.<sup>128</sup>

**Selected congressional actions.** In January 2022, some Members of the Senate and House formed bipartisan caucuses to promote the Abraham Accords.<sup>129</sup> 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 measures within Arab League states that legally or practically restrict or discourage normalization efforts with Israel or domestic support for such efforts.

The FY2023 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:

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.

In the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 1268 seeks to amend the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956 to establish the position of "Special Envoy for the Abraham Accords."

## Countering Iran

Israeli officials cite Iran as one of their primary concerns, largely because of (1) antipathy toward Israel expressed by Iran's revolutionary regime, (2) Iran's broad regional influence (including in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen), and (3) Iran's nuclear and missile programs and advanced conventional weapons capabilities. Iran-backed groups' demonstrated abilities since 2019 to penetrate the air defenses of countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE through coordinated drone and missile attacks have implications for Israeli security calculations.<sup>130</sup> 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."<sup>131</sup>

## 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

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<sup>127</sup> Anshel Pfeffer, "How Israel and Saudi Arabia Plan to Down Iranian Drones Together," *Haaretz*, July 13, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Dion Nissenbaum, "Inside a U.S. Navy Maritime Drone Operation Aimed at Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2022.

<sup>129</sup> For more information, see <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Senate%20Abraham%20Accords%20Caucus%20Mission%20Statement.pdf>.

<sup>130</sup> 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.

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Seth J. Frantzman, "Iran and Hezbollah analyze Israel's 'war between the wars,'" *Jerusalem Post*, November 14, 2021.

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.<sup>132</sup> 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.<sup>133</sup> 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.<sup>134</sup>

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. During their stints as prime minister, Bennett (2021-2022) and Yair Lapid (2022) opposed the deal but largely abstained from involvement in U.S. debates on the issue.<sup>135</sup> 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.<sup>136</sup>

During President Biden's trip to Israel in July, 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.”<sup>137</sup> Additionally, Biden said that he would be willing to use force against Iran as a “last resort” to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>138</sup> In February 2023, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom 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.<sup>139</sup>

In January, 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

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<sup>132</sup> Stephanie Liechtenstein, “UN report: Uranium particles enriched to 83.7% found in Iran,” *Associated Press*, February 28, 2023.

<sup>133</sup> 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.

<sup>134</sup> Dion Nissenbaum et al., “Israel Widens Covert Actions to Rein in Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2022.

<sup>135</sup> “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.

<sup>136</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The dimming prospects of returning to a nuclear agreement with Iran*, November 2022.

<sup>137</sup> White House, “The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration,” July 14, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> “Biden delivers tough talk on Iran as he opens Mideast visit,” *Associated Press*, July 15, 2022.

<sup>139</sup> 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.



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.<sup>140</sup>

Various sources document reported Israeli covert or military operations targeting Iran’s nuclear program,<sup>141</sup> and some U.S. officials have reportedly differed with Israeli counterparts on the overall effectiveness of such operations.<sup>142</sup> Even with reported upgrades to Israeli military capabilities,<sup>143</sup> questions apparently remain about military readiness for a major operation against Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>144</sup>

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.”<sup>145</sup> Amid some international concerns about advanced levels of Iranian uranium enrichment, Defense Minister Galant stated in February that Israel would not allow Iran to enrich uranium to 90%.<sup>146</sup>

## 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.<sup>147</sup> Speculation persists about the potential for wider conflict and its implications, including from incursions into Israeli airspace by Hezbollah drones.<sup>148</sup>

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.<sup>149</sup> 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.<sup>150</sup> In late 2022, Israeli officials reportedly warned Lebanon

<sup>140</sup> 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.

<sup>141</sup> “Iran foils Israel-linked ‘sabotage’ plot at nuclear plant,” *Agence France Presse*, March 15, 2022.

<sup>142</sup> David E. Sanger et al., “Israeli Attacks Spur Upgrade of Iran Sites,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2021.

<sup>143</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Israel’s ‘Top Gun’: The US-Israeli aircraft that can take down Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 25, 2023.

<sup>144</sup> Yossi Melman, “Israel Has No Realistic Military Option on Iran,” *Haaretz*, September 1, 2022.

<sup>145</sup> Transcript: One-On-One with Israel’s Netanyahu amid Surging Violence.

<sup>146</sup> “Netanyahu said to huddle repeatedly with military brass over possible attack on Iran,” *Times of Israel*, February 22, 2023.

<sup>147</sup> CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud; CRS In Focus IF10703, *Lebanese Hezbollah*, by Carla E. Humud.

<sup>148</sup> 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.

<sup>149</sup> 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.

<sup>150</sup> “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

that Israel could strike the Beirut airport if it serves as a destination for weapons smuggling, based on reports that Iran has begun or planned flights that could carry equipment directly to Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>151</sup>

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.<sup>152</sup>

Russia has reportedly shown some capacity to thwart Israeli airstrikes against Iranian or Syrian targets,<sup>153</sup> but has generally refrained via a deconfliction mechanism with Israel.<sup>154</sup> This deconfliction has apparently continued to date even with Russia's war on Ukraine, but Russia has criticized some Israeli strikes.<sup>155</sup>

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 has centered on whether the economic benefits from the deal are worth the concessions and the possible emboldening of Hezbollah.<sup>156</sup> While Prime Minister Netanyahu made a statement before taking office again about "neutralizing" (rather than canceling) the maritime boundary agreement,<sup>157</sup> his government has not taken action to date.<sup>158</sup>

## 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.<sup>159</sup> 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.<sup>160</sup>

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Supplying Hezbollah Project," February 6, 2022.

<sup>151</sup> Ben Caspit, "Israel could strike in Lebanon if Iran renews weapons smuggling," *Al-Monitor*, December 16, 2022.

<sup>152</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Thousands of airstrikes carried out by Israel in past five years," *jpost.com*, March 29, 2022.

<sup>153</sup> Arie Egozi, "Israel Shifts to Standoff Weapons in Syria as Russian Threats Increase," *Breaking Defense*, July 27, 2021.

<sup>154</sup> Jacob Magid, "Russia says military coordination with Israel in Syria will continue as usual," *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2022.

<sup>155</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Israel to increase military, civilian aid to Ukraine – report," *jpost.com*, May 4, 2022; Emanuel Fabian, "Shuttering Damascus airport, Israel ramps up its efforts to foil Iran arms transfers," *Times of Israel*, June 12, 2022.

<sup>156</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Israel and Lebanon Sign Deal on Maritime Border," *New York Times*, October 28, 2022.

<sup>157</sup> Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Netanyahu says Ben Gvir could be police minister, vows to 'neutralize' Lebanon deal," *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2022.

<sup>158</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, "Qatar swoops into Lebanon gas deal in wake of Jerusalem-Beirut agreement," *Jerusalem Post*, January 31, 2023.

<sup>159</sup> Bret Stephens, "Naftali Bennett's Exit Interview," *New York Times*, June 21, 2022; Bar Peleg, "Israel to Bar Ukrainians Arriving Since October From Working," *Ha'aretz*, 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.

<sup>160</sup> Transcript: One-On-One with Israel's Netanyahu amid Surging Violence; Zev Chafets, "Why Israel Won't Supply



Despite entreaties from U.S. and Ukrainian officials, Israel has shown reluctance to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine.<sup>161</sup> Starting in May 2022, Israel has sent some protective gear to Ukrainian rescue forces and civilian organizations.<sup>162</sup>

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.<sup>163</sup> In November 2022, one news outlet reported that Israel had begun supplying “strategic materials” to a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member for use in Ukraine.<sup>164</sup>

In 2022 and 2023, the United States reportedly withdrew 300,000 155-millimeter artillery shells from War Reserves Stockpiles in Israel to send to Ukraine.<sup>165</sup> 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.”<sup>166</sup>

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.<sup>167</sup>

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.<sup>168</sup>

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the Iron Dome to Ukraine,” *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2022.

<sup>161</sup> Arie Egozi, “As Iranian munitions kill in Ukraine, pressure builds for Israel to reassess its Russian balancing act,” *Breaking Defense*, October 18, 2022.

<sup>162</sup> “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.

<sup>163</sup> “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.

<sup>164</sup> Yossi Melman, “Under U.S. Pressure, Israel Funded ‘Strategic Materials’ for Ukraine,” *Ha’aretz*, November 17, 2022.

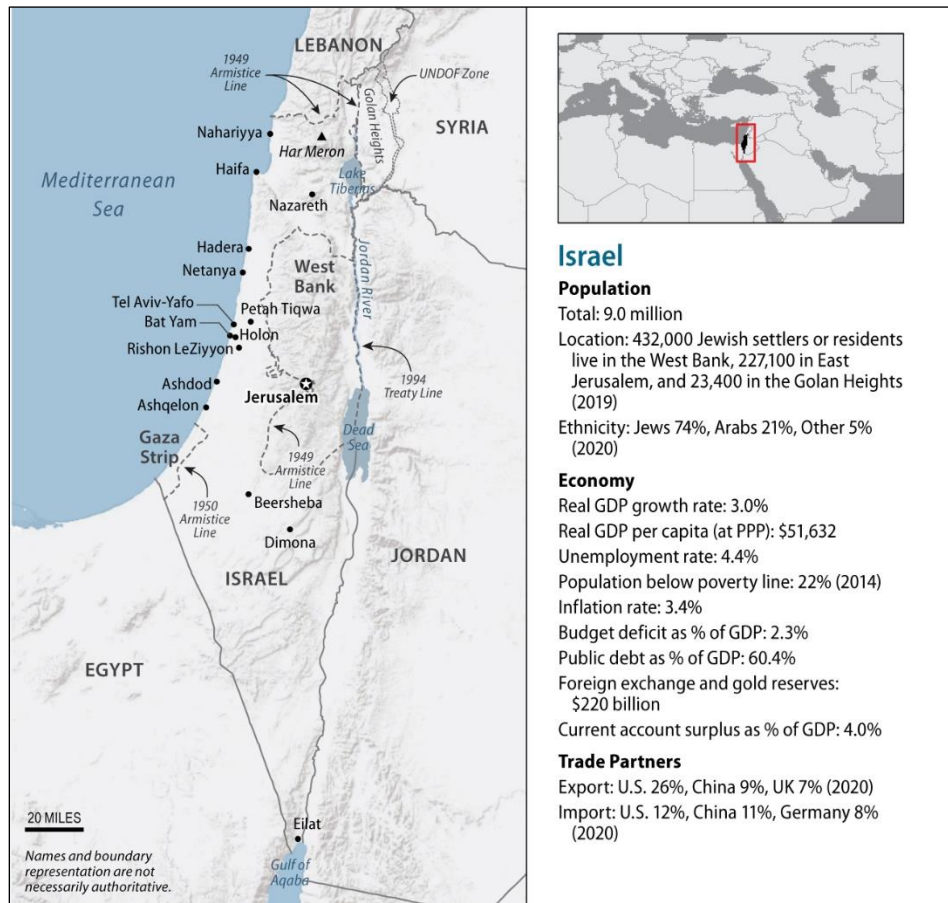
<sup>165</sup> Eric Schmitt, Adam Entous, Ronen Bergman, John Ismay, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Pentagon Sends U.S. Arms Stored in Israel to Ukraine,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2023.

<sup>166</sup> Barak Ravid, “U.S. sends weapons stored in Israel to Ukraine,” *Axios*, January 18, 2023.

<sup>167</sup> Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Israel approves export licenses for anti-drone systems for Ukraine,” *Axios*, March 15, 2023.

<sup>168</sup> Anton Troianovski and Isabel Kershner, “Russia Moves to Shut Down Agency Handling Emigration to Israel,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2022.

## Appendix A. Israel: Map and Basic Facts



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



המחנה הממלכתי

#### **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.



הציונות הדתית

#### **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 nominal 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.



עוצמה יהודית

#### **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.



ישראל ביתנו  
בראשות אביגדור ליברמן

#### **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.



נעם

**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.<sup>169</sup>

On October 27, the parties signed documents to begin implementation of the deal.<sup>170</sup> 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.<sup>171</sup>

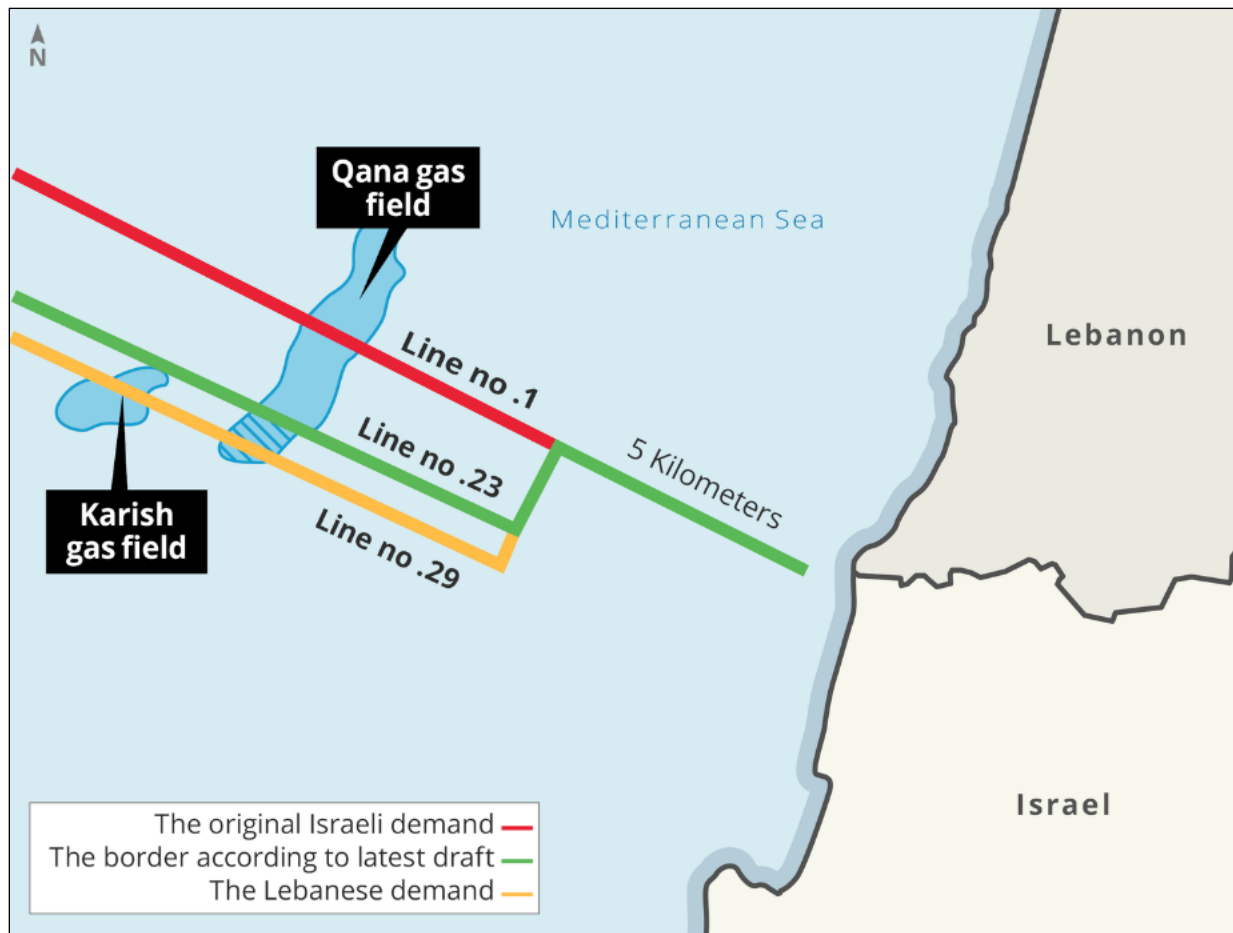
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<sup>169</sup> White House, "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on the Israel-Lebanon Maritime Agreement," October 11, 2022.

<sup>170</sup> Lazar Berman, "Biden drafts letter guaranteeing Israel's rights in Lebanon maritime deal," *Times of Israel*, October 29, 2022.

<sup>171</sup> 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.<sup>172</sup>

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.

<sup>172</sup> Lazar Berman, “Israeli official: Development of disputed Qana gas field will take four stages,” *Times of Israel*, October 12, 2022.



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