

ME101 Lecture 5: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Israel – More than Just Palestine

Speaker: Mr Kevjn Lim, Moderator: Mr Carl Skadian

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While the formative decades of Israel's emergence as a state since 1948 were marked by military conflicts against hostile Arab neighbours, today, the major perils faced by the nation-state are arguably no longer existential in nature, said Mr Kevjn Lim. Instead, geopolitical competition has emerged as a vital platform through which the Israeli state navigates its national interests and contains its regional rivals.

Turkey–Iran Relations

To the Israelis, the most direct threat to their nation is posed by Iran, a non-Arab regional power with a considerable sphere of influence that includes hostile Arab militias still engaged in asymmetrical warfare with Israel.

Currently, Syria is a region of interest for Israel, given that Iran has sought to entrench itself militarily and politically in the country, leading to extended hostilities on Israel's northern front. Israel has conducted air strikes over Syrian targets to prevent Iran's entrenchment as well as to prevent Iranian transfers of sensitive military hardware to both Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon.

Iran's nuclear programme presents another pressing concern for Israel. Since its 1981 Begin Doctrine, Israel has sought to destroy the nuclear capabilities of hostile states such as Iraq, and continues to face the dilemma of whether or not to strike at Iran's nuclear facilities. With Iran's bolstering of its ballistic capabilities following the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) agreement, the nuclear issue maintains a high profile on the Israeli agenda.

The conflict between Israel and Iran has not taken the form of a direct interstate conventional war, instead, it has played out in more covert fields, such as assassinations and cyber warfare. Between 2010 and 2012, Israel allegedly led the assassinations of a number of Iranian nuclear scientists. Iran and Hizballah have responded with the targeted killings of Israelis across a number of countries, including Thailand and Bulgaria. Meanwhile, cyber warfare between the two states have targeted not only military facilities, but also civilian infrastructure as well.

Israel's Warming Ties with the Sunni World

Over the last decade, however, Iran has sought other ways to contain Iran, especially in the realm of geopolitical competition. This has mainly taken the form of a growing common front involving Israel and the Sunni powers (especially the Gulf states) against Shia Iran.

The deepening affinities between Israel and the Sunni states are driven by a perception of Iran as a major threat as well as a convergence of other interests. The removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the US withdrawal from the region have together removed the traditional counterweights to Iranian power. The events of the Arab Spring, coupled with the fact that many Sunni states harbour considerable Shia minorities, have further increased fears of Iranian and/or Shiite influence in encouraging dissent. For these states, Israel remains the only viable power willing and able to counteract Iran directly.

Israeli relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have also improved, especially since the crowning of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The Gulf states' attempts at diversification away from oil have further presented avenues for economic cooperation with Israel, especially in the high tech sector. Beyond the Gulf states, Israel also considers its relations with Egypt and Jordan as key to its national security interests. The stability of the Jordanian border is particularly critical, as it is an area in which Israel lacks strategic depth.

Israel–Turkey Relations

Another key dimension of Israel's geopolitical considerations involves its relations with Turkey. Israeli–Turkish relations plummeted during the 2009 Gaza conflict and reached a nadir during the Mavi Marmara incident the following year when nine Turkish activists were killed by Israelis forces. Since then, relations have somewhat improved, although tensions have flared sporadically between the two states.

Currently, the two are at odds over a particularly contentious issue concerning the arena of gas politics in the eastern Mediterranean region. Increasing Turkish assertiveness in this arena has resulted in disagreements with other players, namely Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. This conflict represents a part of broader intra-Nato tensions between Turkey and Greece. Earlier this year, Israel signed a pipeline agreement with Greece and Cyprus to supply gas to the EU. As such, while Israel remains a bit player in Turkish–Greek tensions, it maintains an interest as the outcome of this conflict would impact its ability to export gas to the EU, whether through pipelines or liquefaction. The geopolitical competition over natural resources has since prompted a closer alignment between Israel, Greece as well as other gas stakeholders such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in opposition to Turkey and Northern Cyprus. Principal issues under contention include the demarcation of maritime and island borders between Greece and Turkey.

US and China's Role in the Middle East: An Israeli Perspective

The presence of global powers in the Middle East has always been critical to Israel's geopolitical worldview. China's presence in the region is marked by its rising role in trade and investment, seen especially in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Israel remains eager to be part of the BRI, while its high-tech and innovation sectors are of high importance to China. A potentially controversial issue for Israel is the regional operations of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and their subsidiaries in the construction sector, as they maintain a presence both in Israel and hostile countries such as Iran. The expiration of the UN arms embargo on Iran in October, and the possibility of Chinese arms sales to a geopolitical rival, represents another possible issue for Israel.

While the BRI has the potential to bring countries in the Middle East together by giving them more stake in regional peace and stability, a multilateral status quo has not yet emerged as BRI engagements continue to be mainly bilateral, and China has shown no interest in assuming the role of conflict mediator in the region. This means that the US regional withdrawal and its subsequent transition to an offshore, rather than onshore, balancer continues to be a significant repercussions in Israeli geopolitical calculations. While vacuum left by the US withdrawal has drawn other powers such as Russia and Turkey, the American military and diplomatic commitment to maintaining Israel's security and qualitative military edge remains a key element of Israeli national security thinking. In the long run, however, shifts in the regional balance of power might push Israel to compensate for the increasingly minimal US role in the region.

Highlights from the Question and Answer Session

A diverse range of questions was brought up by the audience. Several questions concerning the recent normalisation of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel through the signing of the Abraham Accords was a clear topic of interest. How was news of the accords received in the Arab world, and within Israel itself? Might other countries be inspired to follow suit, especially given US President Donald Trump's proclamation that four or five other countries were ready to normalise relations with Israel too?

Mr Lim noted that news of the accords drew a mixed response around the Arab world, with a wide variety of reactions, both positive and negative, expressed by statesmen, press outlets and civil society actors

across different countries. Lebanon and Syria, for instance, were unsurprisingly critical of the accords. In Tunisia and Morocco, many elites also reacted negatively to the accords; some saw the accords as being engineered by President Trump, while others regarded the normalisation process as a betrayal of principles in favour of hard-nosed interests.

Within Israel itself, Mr Lim reported that the general reaction to the accords was one of exuberance for the possibilities offered by the normalisation of relations. This optimism was expressed by both the general population and the political class, and support for the accords was voiced even by the opposition coalition, led by Yair Opposition Leader Yair Lapid.

In considering the possibilities of other states in the regional following in the wake of the UAE and Bahrain in normalising relations with Israel, Mr Lim noted that the ties between Israel and many Sunni countries were often multifaceted. Countries like Morocco and Tunisia, for instance, remain popular destinations for Israeli tourists and pilgrims, despite the lack of official diplomatic relations between these states and Israel. Oman and Sudan perhaps contain the strongest possibility of following in Bahrain's and UAE's footsteps. Oman has emphasised its role a neutral intermediary and notably participated in the Bahrain's 2019 summit on Palestine–Israeli peace, while Sudan last year saw the toppling of its anti-Israeli leader Omar al-Bashir and has received visits from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.