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

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S ince the establishment — or reconstitution — of its statehood following the Arab–Israeli War in 1948, Israel's geopolitical setting has evolved dramatically over the past 70 years. While its initial formative decades were marked by existentialist threats posed by surrounding hostile Arab armies, Israel now faces a different set of challenges. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the axis of resistance it leads — comprising a network of proxies and client militias — tops that list. The shared threat of Iran has also contributed to a political convergence between Israel and other Gulf states, resulting in the displacement of the Palestinian question as the central organising principle of the region's conflictual relations.

A Drop in a Hostile Arab Sea: Israel's Formative Years

Surrounded by multiple hostile Arab armies, Israel's first few decades were marked by existential threats and its principal geopolitical challenge lay in securing its own survival. The Suez Crisis in 1956 led to armed conflict between Israel and Egypt, along with the involvement of the UK and France. The Six-Day War between Israel and a coalition of Arab states occurred in 1967, during which Israel gained control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This was followed by the War of Attrition between Israel and a number of its neighbours including Egypt, lasting from 1967 to 1970. In 1973, the Yon Kippur War was fought between Israel and an Arab coalition led by Egypt and Syria, the two leading regional powers at that time.

Strategically speaking, conflicts in desert and semi-arid environments often involve ground manoeuvres, armoured warfare and an emphasis on air superiority and aerial defences. To make up for its numerical disadvantages in the region, Israel sought to achieve qualitative superiority by pursuing a national security approach based on three key elements. The first was the establishment of a disproportionately outsized military, with both men and women being drafted for service. The second was the maintenance of a technological edge vis-a-vis its regional neighbours. The third was a reliance on superpower patronage. On a diplomatic level, Israel, under its Periphery Doctrine, also established ties with countries beyond its immediate surroundings and sought the support of non-Arab allies such as Kemalist Turkey, Iran (then under the reign of the Shah), the Kurds in Iraq and to a less successful extent, the Maronite Christians in Lebanon.

From the late 1970s, Israel's geopolitical position began to change, particularly with the onset of the Lebanese civil war on its northern border. By this period, the existential threat posed by hostile Arab armies had somewhat subsided. Israel's military involvement in the Lebanese civil war, which lasted 15 years from 1975 to 1990, was aimed primarily at removing the threat posed by Palestinian militants who had been displaced to Lebanon from Jordan. Under the right-wing government of then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 but subsequently scaled back its presence and focused on occupying a security buffer in its northern border. During this time, Israel also faced Palestinian uprisings — known as intifadas — in the West Bank and

Gaza Strip. These developments meant that Israel's conduct of war had now largely transitioned from conventional conflicts to guerilla-type urban situations.

New Challenges: Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Today, on many indicators of hard power, Israel is now the region's leading military force. The main geopolitical challenges faced by Israel are no longer existential. Instead, its chief concern is now the asymmetric threat posed by Iran — a large non-Arab Muslim state — as well as the 'axis of resistance' led by Tehran comprising mainly Arab militia proxies and client on-state actors such as the Hizballah in Lebanon.

Since its Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has ceased to recognise Israel's right to exist and started seeing it as its main ideological archenemy. Iran poses three major concerns for Tel Aviv. Firstly, Iran's nuclear programme is believed, by Israel, to have military objectives. Secondly, over the years, Iran's ballistic military programme has evolved to the point where it is now able — at least in principle — to include all of the Middle East in its range. Thirdly, Iran-backed proxies and client militias are deemed a significant threat by Israel. Syria remains the major state actor within Iran's sphere of influence and Iran's network of proxies comprise mostly Shi'a but also some Sunni groups. These groups include the Hizballah — Iran's closest and most powerful proxy — in Lebanon, various Iraq-based militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Palestinian groups such as Hamas and rejectionist militias such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Houthi militias in Yemen. These groups have varying degrees of working relations with Tehran.

Over the past few years, Israel's strategy vis-a-vis Iran has been to contain the Islamic Republic and curtail its expanding influence and its efforts have played out significantly across four key arenas: Tehran's nuclear programme, the civil war in Syria, the realm of cyber warfare and the maritime environment.

Israel's main perceived threat is the first factor – Iran's nuclear programme. Under the Begin Doctrine —first enunciated in 1981 — Israel has resolved to deny its enemies from acquiring militarised nuclear capabilities. Iran already possesses capable missile delivery systems and is currently enriching uranium to purity levels approaching military grade, although it has not yet perfected the ability to miniaturise uranium for use in a ballistic missile warhead. Iran has also dispersed the functions and locations of its nuclear facilities, with some being deep underground, making them difficult to be targeted altogether. While Israel has repeatedly stressed its willingness to mount sustained kinetic military attacks on Iran's nuclear programme if necessary, it would still likely require US co-operation to deliver sustained damage. Hence, Israel has so far focused on sabotage and assassination operations, the frequency of which has been increased especially after the abandonment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement by the Trump administration. In November last year, Iranian nuclear physicist and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps brigadier general Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated after being reportedly surveilled by Israel for 14 years. Over the past months, Israel is also alleged to be behind many sabotage attacks to Iran's nuclear facilities, including two major attacks on the prominent Natanz nuclear enrichment plant. The first attack targeted the above-ground advanced centrifuge assembly area, while the second targeted the facility's main and backup power systems, causing significant damage to a large number of spinning centrifuges.

The second arena where Israel's Iran containment strategy has played out prominently is in war-torn Syria. Already facing the threat of Lebanese Hizballah on its northern borders, Israel has, for the greater part of the last decade, sought to prevent Iran from militarily entrenching itself in Syria. To this end, Israel has been carrying out regular and frequent airstrikes against Iranian and Iran-backed forces, particularly focusing on the transfer of precision weaponry from Iran to the Hizballah. Lately, Israel has also targeted laboratories in Syrian territories that work on improving the precision of missiles and rocket arsenals. With very few exceptions, these Israeli airstrikes typically do not elicit a response from Iran.

The cyber warfare arena is another burgeoning area of confrontation between Israel and Iran. In 2010, a malicious computer worm called Stuxnet was discovered and is now widely believed to have been jointly created

by the US and Israel to target spinning centrifuges in Iran's nuclear facilities. The discovery of Stuxnet became the principal factor in spurring Iran to step up its cyber offensive capabilities. Both Iran and Israel mount attacks on each other's cyber ecosystems on a daily basis, targeting military and commercial but also increasingly, civilian infrastructures. However, there is an asymmetry in this arena; while Iran has the capabilities to carry out distributed denial-of-service attacks, disruption of texts, espionage, phishing and other cyberattacks, its cyber defences are understood to be significantly under-developed as compared to Israel's.

The fourth and most recent arena of confrontation involves tit-for-tat attacks in maritime territory, which are understood to have begun sometime in mid to late 2019. This period saw escalated tensions in the Persian Gulf and Iran is thought to have been behind multiple attacks targeting commercial vessels and oil facilities. Israel has also reportedly carried out sabotage attacks on over 20 Iranian vessels — mostly commercial vessels ferrying crude oil to Syria but also some vessels carrying a cargo of weaponry. A recent attack on an Iranian naval vessel in the Red Sea in April earlier this year was also attributed to Israel, who may or may not also have been involved in the sinking of the Khark — Iran's largest naval logistics vessel — just two months later in June. After the media disclosure of Israel's alleged involvement in these incidents by The Wall Street Journal in March, Iran has in turn retaliated against several Israeli commercial vessels around the Persian Gulf, including a drone attack on a tanker linked to an Israeli tycoon which resulted in the deaths of two crew members — the first casualties in the maritime arena of disputes.

The Convergence of Israeli–Gulf Interests: A Political Realignment of the Middle East?

Both Israel and Iran have undergone changes in their respective governments in recent years. In June this year, the 12-year reign of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to an end, paving the way for Naftali Bennett to assume the role (in a rotation agreement with left-wing leader Yair Lapid). Despite the change, however, it is unlikely that Israel would alter its policy of pressure towards Iran and the axis of resistance. In Iran, the elevation of Ebrahim Raisi has meant that conservative hardliners are now in control of all the executive branches of the government. The Raisi administration is further expected to expand Iran's regional influence, along with its network of proxies and client militias.

Iran's regional policy has intensified threat perceptions within the region and has also facilitated avenues of co-operation between Israel and other regional powers. Notably, many Sunni-majority Gulf states possess large Shi'a communities susceptible to Iranian influence. For countries such as Saudi Arabia, the threat from Iran has been magnified since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which toppled Saddam Hussein's administration that had, up to that point, served as the major ideological and military counterweight to Iran in the region. The perceived threat from Iran has worsened since the 2011 Arab uprisings, during which Tehran appeared to be expanding not only its influence but also its military involvement – first in the Syrian civil war and subsequently in Iraq and Yemen. In 2016, the execution of a prominent Saudi Shi'i cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr led to the firebombing of the KSA embassy in Tehran and an attack on the Saudi Arabian consulate in Mashhad by Iranian protesters. Concerns of an unchecked Iran have been further amplified due to perceptions of a waning US commitment to the region, given Washington's pivot to Asia, the lack of a strong American response to the September 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facilities attributed to Iran and the withdrawal of US troops in Iraq, Syria, and most recently, Afghanistan.

The normalisation agreements (popularly referred to as the Abraham Accords) signed between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan signalled the culmination of a growing front comprising Israel and some of the region's monarchies against Iran. While other motives such as economic and technological co-operation also lay behind the Abraham Accords, the perception of a shared threat posed by Iran remained a vital aspect. With the rise of Mohamed bin Salman as Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Israel–GCC ties have seen further improvement and Israel has also been in exploratory talks with other governments of Sunni-majority countries such as Indonesia, Mauritania and Libya. Security and intelligence co-operation between Israel and other states is also underway, as seen from the recent reports documenting the sale of Israeli spyware to countries including Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Importantly, the normalisation agreements also appear to have had the effect of marginalising the Palestinian issue, indicating that Israeli-Palestinian peace is no longer a necessary condition for normalised ties between Israel and Muslim countries. The escalation of Israeli–Palestinian tensions earlier this year in May ultimately did not endanger relations between Israel and its partners in the Abraham Accords. Nevertheless, the Palestinian issue remains a key component in the region. The current coalition government led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid features a wide range of political parties spanning both the right and left ends of the spectrum. The right-wing faction's preference for settlement expansion — and even annexation of the West Bank — is ultimately mitigated by pushback from the other constituents of the coalition, which includes, for the first time, an Islamist Arab party. Under this coalition government, Israel has worked to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, in the West Bank, at the expense of Hamas in the Gaza strip, even if there is little chance of any genuine revival of the peace process.

Highlights of the Question & Answer Session

Q: Israel is often linked to the paradigm of small states — how does it strive to remain relevant in the region, especially given its small size and territory? What are the traits that aid it in this regard?

A: Israel is a country with a population barely bigger than Singapore's and yet, it enjoys many significant advantages in the region. Being commonly referred to as a startup nation, Israel leads in many indices of technological development and enjoys advantages across a wide swath of sectors. It is a strong cyber power with much to offer in terms of cyber security — as seen from the recent controversy involving the use of Israeli Pegasus spyware by other countries such as the UAE. Israeli technology is thus sought after by many countries. Israel is also working with the UAE to develop agricultural technology to improve self-sufficiency in terms of resources for countries in desert environments.

Israel's relationship with the US is also a key advantage it has in navigating the geopolitical problems it faces in the region. Israeli–US relations have undergone fluctuations and the recent efforts by progressive democrats to challenge funding to resupply Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system is indicative of the growing criticism of Israel within some quarters of the American left. Nevertheless, Israeli–US relations remain robust and some Middle Eastern countries have even sought to leverage on Tel Aviv's close relationship with Washington.

Apart from technological superiority and superpower patronage, Israel has other advantages. Israeli military technology is highly sought after and Israel has sold arms and UAV drones to countries such as Azerbaijan and Armenia. Having discovered natural gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean area, Israel is also becoming a significant player in energy. It has joined the East Mediterranean Gas Forum and currently acts as somewhat of a conduit for the UAE, which hopes to transport its energy through Israel to European states.

Q: How is Tel Aviv aligned with Russia and China? What is Israel's foreign policy objectives vis-a-vis these countries and what is the nature of Israeli co-operation with them?

A: The nature of Israel's co-operation with China and Russia is a pragmatic one. Russian president Vladimir Putin maintained a direct phone line with former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office. While Mr Netanyahu's successor Naftali Bennet does not have the same personal ties with Mr Putin, co-operation between their respective continues on a pragmatic level. This is seen most prominently in Syria, where both states have established deconstruction mechanism to avoid friendly fire between their forces. While Russia has played along with Iran's ambitions to entrench itself militarily in Syria, Moscow has also given Israel the space to achieve its own military objectives. For instance, due to Russian deconfliction mechanisms, Israeli airstrikes take place without striking Russian forces.

Israel's engagement with China represents a complex and interesting case. Under the previous administration of Mr Netanyahu, Israel rapidly improved its commercial ties with China and essentially allowed Chinese investments deep into Israeli economic sectors, especially the sensitive technological sector. Notably, despite

having signed accords and agreements in tech co-operation, Israel has not been made a Comprehensive Strategic Partner of China — a status that Beijing has conferred to a growing number of countries in the region, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. A significant factor behind this involves Israel's relationship with the US, which has disapproved of Israel's willingness to allow the Chinese to build critical infrastructure on Israeli soil. For example, Chinese firms have just taken over a 25-year lease at Haifa port, one of Israel's most important commercial import gateways. China has also sought to acquire Israeli companies, with one example being Tnuva, a major Israeli food producer. Thus, in recent years, Israel has found itself navigating between the US and China, with Washington urging Tel Aviv to dilute its relationship with Beijing and to be more circumspect in its dealings with Chinese firms, given their possible associations with the Chinese state.