



# Israel-Asia Relations

## New Trends, Old Challenges?

Series Editor

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Cover image: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arriving in India, January 2018. Credits: Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs via [Flickr](#) under a CC BY-NC 2.0 creative commons licence. Photographer Avi Ohayon.

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# Editor's Introduction

The nexus between the Middle East and Asia – particularly China's policy towards the Middle East – has garnered major attention in the media and policy circles in recent years.<sup>1</sup> This interest lies not only in the Arab countries' relations with Asia but also in Israel's relations with Asia. In the past decade, there have been many indicators pointing to those burgeoning ties – ranging from China's involvement in Israel's infrastructure (in particular, Haifa port<sup>2</sup>), the rise of Israel-India economic and security cooperation, and the expanding trade between Israel and Indonesia to the recent establishment of a new quadrilateral forum, the "I2U2", comprising India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

But the recent hype about Middle East–Asia relations may be misleading and obscures the fact that they are not new: surely, the scale of political, economic and military exchanges between countries on the two sides is unprecedented but national leaders in each region have long eyed the other. The story of Israel-Asia relations is a case in point.

Back in 1953, David Ben Gurion, the founder of modern Israel and its then prime minister, foresaw, in one of his essays, "the waning hegemony of Europe and the rise of Asia". Ben Gurion went on, "once again, two great and ancient nations – India and China – stride out into

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<sup>1</sup> See among others, Dawn Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order* (Stanford University Press, 2022); Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations*, (Routledge, 2022); Guy Burton, *China and Middle East Conflicts: Responding to War and Rivalry from the Cold War to the Present* (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Reuters, "Israel opens Chinese-operated port in Haifa to boost regional trade links", 2 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-opens-chinese-operated-port-haifa-boost-regional-trade-links-2021-09-02/>

independence. Their weight in the scales of humanity is increasing and is likely to tip those scales more yet hereafter.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite those early signals, Israel-Asia ties have often been neglected.<sup>4</sup> The cultural ties between Zionism and Europe, the social fabric of a Jewish state initially made up of refugees escaping persecution in European countries, and later the Israeli partnership forged with the United States led many observers to conclude that the foreign policy of Israel was first and foremost about its policy with the Western world. This skewed view has led commentators to see the contemporary Israeli policy towards Asia as a mere by-product of the global shift of power from the West to the East.

In fact, Israel has long cultivated ties with Asia. It was the first Middle Eastern state to recognise the People's Republic of China (in 1950) and to endorse Beijing's "One-China" policy (at the expense of the nationalist forces in Taiwan at the time). Historians estimate that there were even contacts between Mao's communist insurgency and the Zionist Organization as early as in the 1920s, with leaders of both movements feeling a sense of shared interests.<sup>5</sup>

India-Israel relations started a little later, in 1950, when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru recognised the newly established state of Israel. However, successive governments in Delhi kept their distance from Israel: concerns over the reactions of the Indian Muslim community and India's non-alignment dogma prevented the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in: Jean-Loup Samaan, *Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery* (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Apart from the notable exception of several academic volumes such as Yoram Evron and Rotem Kowner (eds.), *Israel-Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2023) and Jacob Abadi, *Israel's Quest for Recognition and Acceptance in Asia* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Miranda Bass, "In the Shadow of Giants: The Origins of the China-Israel Defense Relationship", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 15, no.3: 481–497, 482

development of a bilateral partnership. It took several decades, and more specifically the end of the cold war, for the relationship to truly take off.<sup>6</sup>

In other places, the Israeli footprint in Asia was barely visible: after its separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore relied on Israeli military advisers – then nicknamed the “Mexicans” to preserve their secrecy – to help build and train the nascent Singapore Armed Forces;<sup>7</sup> in South Korea, primary school curricula have included the study of the Talmud, considered a major pillar of the learning experience for local pupils.<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore convened a two-day workshop in February 2023, gathering together scholars from across the world – including Israel, China, the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, France and Singapore – to explore the depth of Israel’s partnerships across Asia. The seminar delved into the political and economic drivers of these relationships as well as their scope (and limitations). Particularly, it discussed the evolution of Israel’s policy towards China, India and Japan. It also looked into lesser known areas, such as Israel-Azerbaijan relations and the development of Holocaust studies in China. Altogether, the seminar shed light on a research topic – Israel’s Asia policy – that is likely to expand in the coming years.

## Israel and Great Power Competition in Asia

Today, Israel – like the rest of the Middle East – is aware of the need, and is determined, to nurture close ties with the rising powers of Asia

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<sup>6</sup> P. R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2010); Nicolas Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity: Change, and Compromise since 1922* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: Singapore and the Asian Economic Boom* (Harper Collins, 2000); Mattia Tomba (ed.), *Beating the Odds Together: 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties*, (World Scientific, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ross Arbes, “How the Talmud Became a Best-Seller in South Korea”, *The New Yorker*, 23 June 2015.

even as it is closely monitoring the evolution of great power competition. Some of the contributions in this volume emphasise that Israel's growing attention to Asia does not mean a shift away from the United States, with which Israel has forged a close partnership and benefited from for several decades. In other words, Israel's Asia policy is not a pivot from West to East, but rather a pragmatic rapprochement with the region that economically and politically will shape world affairs in the 21st century.

This is why Israel's relations vis-à-vis the rise of Asian powers constitutes the first pillar of this volume of *Insights*. At the centre of this theme lies the US-China rivalry and its implications for Israel. To better grasp the nuances of those developments, this volume presents readers with two different perspectives. Writing from China, **Wang Zhen** analyses the main factors that will affect the Sino-Israeli relationship and its evolution. **Ehud Eiran**, writing from Israel, makes a pragmatic argument that Israel remains closer to the United States, as it has been traditionally, although Israel-China economic and technological ties today are not inconsequential.

This volume also looks at the implications of great power competition for Israel's relations with two other Asian powers: India and Japan. **Nicolas Blarel** analyses how the intensification of the China-India rivalry affects Israel and leads its decision-makers to rethink their rapprochement with both countries. **Rotem Kowner**, writing about Israel-Japan relations, explains that those ties are not defined by Israel but heavily conditioned by the Japanese side, in particular, Tokyo's calculation of the assets and liabilities that the deepening of its partnership with Israel can bring to it.

## Israel and the Evolving Framework of Middle East-Asia Relations

The other significant factor informing Israel's Asian relations is the Abraham Accords that it signed with two Gulf states (the UAE and Bahrain) in September 2020, followed by Morocco and Sudan. The accords paved the way for a new wave of normalisation between Israel



and the Arab and Muslim world. By extension, the accords enabled Asian countries, mindful of the need to avoid antagonising their domestic Muslim communities, to go public about their own ties with Israel.<sup>9</sup> As speculation over a potential Israel–Saudi Arabia agreement keeps growing, Asian governments are watching out for the sea change that such a development could trigger, if it were to come to pass.<sup>10</sup> **Gedaliah Afterman and Theresa Hoffmann** present the Abraham Accords as the stepping stone for a new diplomatic framework, one that gets Middle Eastern and Asian countries closer, as illustrated by the phenomenon of “minilaterals” like the I2U2.

Other articles in this volume look at the security dimension. **Engin Koç** shows how Israel’s Azerbaijan policy follows a realist logic of balancing the threat from Iran. He writes that Azerbaijan’s reliance on Israel’s military and technical support gives it military superiority over Armenia, in particular in the context of the second Karabakh war of 2020. Given that Israel constitutes a major source of inspiration for small states in Asia seeking effective security strategies for survival, **Christopher Colley and Jean-Loup Samaan** look at the lessons that Taiwan could learn from the Israeli military experience.

## Israel’s Soft Power in Asia

Israel-Asia relations go beyond hard security considerations. Seventy-five years after its creation, Israel still fights for its mere recognition as a “normal” member of the community of nations. That process of “normalisation” cannot solely rely on security-driven policies and has to also build social and cultural bridges to Asia. This is why several papers

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<sup>9</sup> Gedaliah Afterman and Narayanappa Janardhan, “The Abraham Accords Bring the Middle East and Asia Closer”, Abba Eban Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, Reichman University, 14 September 2022, <https://www.eng.arenajournal.org.il/single-post/issue12-afterman-janardhan-middle-east-asia-eng>

<sup>10</sup> Felicia Schwartz, James Shotter, and Samer Al Atrush, “Joe Biden Makes His big Middle East Push: A Saudi Arabia-Israel Pact”, *Financial Times*, 9 August 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/40a87434-9852-4cfe-8616-af2b7a0f21ed>

in this volume investigate the lesser known dimensions of the Israeli engagement with Asia. **Xu Shijie** explores the development of Holocaust studies in China, emerging first after the normalisation of relations between China and the Western world in the 1970s and then expanding in the 1990s following the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Israel.

**Nazhath Faheem** and **Syera Anggreini Buntara** suggest that interfaith diplomacy could possibly improve Israel's relations with Indonesia, provided that such an initiative does not compromise Jakarta's solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Finally, **Jasmine Ashley Kolano** investigates Israel's recent public diplomacy efforts towards young Singaporeans, including cultural and religious programmes.

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This volume of *Insights* has sought to go beyond the typical Arab-centric and China-centric approach to studying Middle East–Asia relations. In focusing on Israel's relations with Asia, we have tried to uncover the wide range of relationships that Israel has forged with Asia and the various dimensions these relationships have taken. We hope the articles in this volume will provide fresh perspectives to policymakers and researchers alike and will spur further scholarship. ◆

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# From the Cold War to a New Cold War?

## A Chinese Perspective of Sino-Israeli Relations

Wang Zhen\*

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Sino-Israeli relations have been at a new crossroads in recent years. With the intensification of concerns in the West over the rise of China, the debate around the future of Sino-Israeli relations has resurfaced. Concerns about the impact that the continued deterioration of US-China relations will have on Sino-Israeli relations are increasing. This article attempts to analyse the main factors that affect the Sino-Israeli relationship and how it is likely to develop in the future.

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### **The History of Sino-Israeli Relations and New Worries**

**T**he presence of Jews in China can be traced back to the period of the Tang and Song dynasties.<sup>1</sup> When the state of Israel was founded, China was still in the throes of a civil war. Some Jewish communities from Shanghai, Tianjin, Harbin and Hong Kong welcomed the establishment of Israel and migrated to the new state. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Zhen, ed., *Country Studies of BRI: Israel* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2021), pp. 424–425.

interactions between China and Israel did not take place until after the founding of Communist China in 1949.

**“Since 2018, some worrying new signs have begun to emerge in the Sino-Israeli relationship.”**

Sino-Israeli relations can be broadly divided into two periods. The 1949–1991 period was the first stage in the development of Sino-Israeli relations and can be referred to as the pre-diplomatic relations period or the Cold War period. During the Cold War, China and Israel had some exchanges but did not establish formal diplomatic relations. The 1992–2018 period, which can be referred to as the post-diplomatic relations period or post-Cold War period, marks the second stage in the development of Sino-Israeli relations. After 1992, the development of Sino-Israeli relations entered a fast track, with a significant increase in mutual trust and economic exchanges between the two sides. In early 2017, on the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the two countries decided to establish a “comprehensive partnership for innovation”, a new positioning that pushed the development of relations between the two countries to a peak.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2018, however, some worrying new signs have begun to emerge in the bilateral relationship. The US-China relationship has entered a period of instability as the United States begins to regard China as a “strategic competitor”, or “near-peer competitor”, and US foreign strategy returns to great power competition.<sup>3</sup> At the end of 2019, the

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<sup>2</sup> “Joint Declaration of the People’s Republic of China and the State of Israel on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Partnership for Innovation”, Xinhua News Agency, 21 March 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/21/c\\_1120668765.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/21/c_1120668765.htm)

<sup>3</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 45; The White House, *The National Security Strategy (NSS)*, October 2022, pp. 11–12, 23–25; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *2021 Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, 9 April 2021; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *2022 Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, 7 February 2022.

Israeli government established a new oversight panel to review the security implications of foreign investment proposals, with Chinese investment undoubtedly being the most targeted. In June 2021, Israel and several Western countries voted in the UN Human Rights Council to condemn the “human rights violation” in Xinjiang, China, and criticism and accusations of China in the Israeli media began to increase. Simultaneously, at the United Nations and other international venues China stepped up the tone of its support for the Palestinian cause.

“Some Israeli experts have even asserted that economic cooperation between China and Israel has passed its peak.”

The year 2022 marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Israel. Although both sides have celebrated this in different ways, their honouring of the anniversary has not dispelled worries in strategic circles in both countries about the future of the bilateral relationship. Some Israeli experts have even asserted that economic cooperation between China and Israel has passed its peak.<sup>4</sup> These views broadly comprise three types. The first one is that the United States and Israel must work together to address the “growing Chinese threat” and not allow China to become a “wedge” in the US-Israeli partnership.<sup>5</sup> The second one involves the belief that Israel and the United States do not share the same views and interests on China,

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<sup>4</sup> Assaf Orion, “No, Israel Isn’t Falling into China’s Orbit”, *Mosaic*, 6 September 2022; Galia Lavi, “China and National Infrastructure in Israel: Past the Peak”, *Strategic Assessment* 25, no. 2 (July 2022); Ehud Eilam, “Israel and China: The Bloom Is off the Rose”, Middle East Institute, 1 December 2022.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/israel-and-china-bloom-rose>.

<sup>5</sup> Yaacov Ayish, “Israel Must Partner with US in Power Competition with China”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 October 2020; Michael Makovsky and Yaacov Ayish, “Israel, US Must Confront China Threat”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 March 2021; Assaf Orion, “No, Israel Isn’t Falling into China’s Orbit”.

and that “there is no old, negative historical baggage between the two countries [Israel and China] as there is between the United States and China”. Therefore, “it is not wise for Israel to openly join the fight between the two giants now.”<sup>6</sup> The third view is that “surrendering to American dictates will only lead to continued pressure”, so Israel must adopt a foreign policy of “delicate balance”, which involves “developing its economic and technological partnership with China while maintaining a security partnership with the United States.”<sup>7</sup>

## Key Variables Affecting Sino-Israeli Relations

Yitzhak Shichor argues that the development of Sino-Israeli relations depends on three main variables, namely, China’s economic growth, the Arab-Israeli conflict and Sino-American relations.<sup>8</sup> This paper argues that the international environment, economic interests, geopolitics, third countries and mutual perceptions all play an important role in the development of bilateral relations.

**The international environment.** Among the features of the current international environment two are most relevant and important here. The first is the resurgence of the cold war mentality. As the strategic competition between China and the United States intensifies, the number of voices in the United States advocating a new cold war against China is increasing. Although the Biden administration has repeatedly told China that the US government does not seek a new cold war with China, the United States is increasingly approaching an economic, technological and

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<sup>6</sup> Shalom Salomon Wald, “Must Israel ‘Support Washington to Face Down Beijing?’”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 28 October 2020; Shalom Salomon Wald, “China, the American Challenge and the Implications for Israel and the Jewish People”, The Jewish People Policy Institute, 14 September 2021. <https://jppi.org.il/en/article>.

<sup>7</sup> Mordechai Chaziza, “Israel-China Relations in an Era of Strategic Rivalry and Great Power Competition”, *Strategic Assessment* 25, no. 2 (July 2022), pp.34–35.

<sup>8</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, “On Probation: The Open-Ended Future of Sino-Israeli Relations”, Middle East Institute, 5 September 2014, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/probation-open-ended-future-sino-israeli-relations>.

military containment of China, similar to its Cold War containment of the Soviet Union. This re-alignment of the international community will inevitably force Israel to choose sides and create new constraints on Israel's relations with China.

**“As the strategic competition between China and the United States intensifies, the number of voices in the United States advocating a new cold war against China is increasing.”**

The second feature is the stagnation and retrogression of globalisation, which has been the subject of much debate since the outbreak of the financial crisis in the West in 2008. As some scholars have argued, “the myth of a world without borders has collapsed”, and Western countries that used to advocate free trade and globalisation have started to adopt trade protectionism, while China has become the staunchest defender of globalisation.<sup>9</sup> Under the impact of anti-globalisation, countries have become more concerned with what they consider their national security, geopolitics and industrial autonomy. Traditional international industrial chains are being reorganised and commercial cooperation based on the market mechanism is now facing increasing uncertainty.

**Economic interests.** At the start of Sino-Israeli diplomatic relations in 1992, trade between the two countries amounted to only US\$51.47 million; by 2021 it had increased by more than 400 times to US\$22.8 billion, and China is now Israel's top trading country in Asia and its

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<sup>9</sup> Pankaj Ghemawat, “Globalization in the Age of Trump”, *Harvard Business Review*, July/August 2017, pp.112–123.

second largest in the world.<sup>10</sup> The two countries are currently working towards a free trade agreement. Trade between the two countries has three characteristics. First, there have never been any political preconditions for bilateral economic cooperation, and there is no hostility among Chinese citizens towards Israeli citizens and Israeli products arising from anti-Semitism or other prejudices. Second, the two countries' economies are highly complementary.<sup>11</sup> Many Israeli hi-tech companies are known for their research and development capabilities but need large markets for profitability and sustainability, and the Chinese market is where demand for hi-tech products is largest in the world currently. Third, for Israel, which lacks oil and gas resources, economic cooperation in other areas may provide a lever to influence China's Middle East policy.

But there are two sources of uncertainty revolving around economic factors that could affect cooperation between the two countries. The first is whether China's economic growth will continue into the future. The second is whether the future restructuring of international industrial chains will reduce the potential for economic cooperation between the two countries.

**Geopolitics.** Although China has always stated that it has no intention of getting involved in the geopolitical competition in the Middle East, China's influence in the region is an undeniable reality. Whether or not China intends to intervene in regional conflicts, its position as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations is crucial in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other Middle East flashpoints where Israeli interests are at stake. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring,

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<sup>10</sup> Peng Dawei, "China-Israel trade reaches \$22.8 billion by 2021", China News Agency (中国新闻社), 24 January 2022, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cj/2022/01-25/9661006.shtml>.

<sup>11</sup> Institute of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, Ministry of Commerce, China, Economic and Commercial Department of the Chinese Embassy in Israel; and Department of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation, Ministry of Commerce, China, *Country (Region) Guide to Outward Investment Cooperation: Israel* (2021 Edition), January 2020, pp 20–21, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/dl/gbdqzn/upload/yiselie.pdf>.



Israel's strategic environment has improved as its relations with the Gulf Arab states have eased considerably. However, with the United States gradually withdrawing from the Middle East, the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, which has been dominated by the United States since the Cold War, is changing, and China is playing an increasing role in the economic development of the region and regional governance. China's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to have an indirect impact on Israel. The economic interdependence that has emerged between China and Iran and between China and Saudi Arabia gives Beijing the leverage to intervene in regional affairs, as we have seen in the recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

“As a non-NATO ally of the United States, Israel is heavily dependent on the United States for its national security and international strategy, thus Israel's independence in pursuing a China policy is limited.”

**Third country or external factors.** The interference of third country factors in Sino-Israeli relations is manifested on two levels. For Israel, the third country factor comes mainly from the United States. As a non-NATO ally of the United States, Israel is heavily dependent on the United States for its national security and international strategy, thus Israel's independence in pursuing a China policy is limited. For China, the external factor that influences its policy towards Israel comes primarily from its policy toward the Arab-Islamic countries. However, unlike the direct US pressure on Israel, China's policy constraints stem from its own long-standing commitment towards and support for Palestine, on the one hand, and its “balanced diplomacy” in the region, on the other, which involves refusing to support one side against the other in regional affairs. US pressure, which has had a negative impact on Sino-Israeli economic cooperation and investment confidence, has generated debate within Israel about its policy towards China. In contrast, China has not changed its policy of balancing between Israel

and the Arab-Islamic countries thus far. However, it is not clear whether China will abandon its existing balanced diplomacy in the future should Israel choose to follow the United States in its containment policy towards China or follow the West on issues such as Taiwan and Xinjiang, which involve China's core interests.

“China’s policy constraints stem from its own long-standing commitment towards and support for Palestine, on the one hand, and its “balanced diplomacy” in the region, on the other, which involves refusing to support one side against the other in regional affairs.”

**Historical heritage and mutual perceptions.** China is among the few countries that have never in their histories produced home-grown anti-Semitism, so the Chinese have little historical baggage when it comes to Jewish issues. Besides, the discovery of the Jewish community in Kaifeng in modern times, as well as Chinese diplomat Dr. Fengshan Ho's issuing of life-saving visas for thousands of Jews during the Second World War and rescue of Jewish refugees in Shanghai, has helped to shape a positive image of China among Israeli and global Jewry. However, the Israeli media, which is heavily influenced by Western discourse, has shown a marked increase in negative coverage of China in recent years. Furthermore, some Israeli media have even questioned the historical fact that Jews had taken refuge in Shanghai during the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> For its part, the Chinese media have also shown a serious split in commentary and perceptions of Israel revolving around Israel's Palestinian policy and other issues.

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<sup>12</sup> Jerusalem Post Editorial, “China has proven to be a bad actor; we owe them nothing”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 August 2020.

## Three Scenarios for the Future of Sino-Israeli Relations

Sino-Israeli relations are at a new crossroads today, in large part because the variables on which the relationship has developed over the previous three decades are changing. By analysing the variables above, we may be able to outline three scenarios for the future development of bilateral relations.

### Scenario 1. Maintaining the current positive momentum

According to this scenario, amid the current international environment and geopolitical changes, if China and Israel can continue to deepen the current high level of political trust, they can maintain the existing momentum of expanding trade and economic ties and develop their cooperation based on market rules and economic interests.

However, maintaining this momentum is becoming increasingly difficult. Firstly, with the growing tensions between the United States and China, the Israeli strategic community's confidence in the development of Sino-Israeli relations has clearly declined and calls for taking sides between the United States and China are on the rise. Secondly, Sino-Israeli cooperation in the hi-tech sector is under pressure as the United States intensifies its siege of China's hi-tech industries. In fact, Chinese hi-tech investment in Israel has been on a downward trend since 2018. If the United States and Israel intensify their scrutiny of Chinese investments in Israeli infrastructure, investments by Chinese companies in Israel's major infrastructure may decrease further in the future. Finally, with the United States renewing its great power competition globally, the strategic competition between China and the United States in the Middle East may intensify in the future, and the room for tacit understanding and cooperation between China and Israel on regional issues in the Middle East will be further circumscribed.

### Scenario 2. Gradually drifting apart and entering a new lull or even a freeze

Following from scenario 1, political contacts between the two countries will be reduced, but economic contacts will be maintained. If Israel

clearly sides with United States, it is bound to adhere to the latter's approach on issues that concern China's core interests, so Sino-Israeli bilateral relations will soon enter a period of mutual estrangement and apathy.

In such circumstances, high-level visits and strategic trust will rapidly decline. However, economic contacts between the two sides will remain although trade and investment will probably be stagnant for a long time. This is because, firstly, it is unthinkable for economic contacts to be completely disrupted between the two countries when the process of globalisation has not yet completely disappeared. Secondly, China is now opening up to the outside world with greater vigour, and the opportunities that its huge market presents are too great for any country, including Israel, to ignore. Thirdly, while the United States will continue to put pressure on Israel to fully decouple from China, it can hardly ask an ally to do something that it cannot do itself. Finally, there are a large number of civilian hi-tech areas outside the realm of the so-called dual-use ones that have military potential and draw US concern. Thus, even in the most extreme cases, there is still room for continued cooperation between Israel and China. However, since cooperating in such sectors would entail heavy investment in research and development and long-term commitments, which would be contingent on a high level of political and strategic trust, Chinese investments in Israel and bilateral trade could stagnate if Israel decides to explicitly side with the United States.

### **Scenario 3. Freezing of relations or even a plunge into a new confrontation**

For the time being, the possibility of such a scenario materialising is very limited, but the prospects have not disappeared. While China and Israel have no direct conflict of interests or desire to engage in direct confrontation, one cannot rule out future developments in the international situation that could cause bilateral relations to spiral out of control. There is no shortage of such precedents in their bilateral relationship during the Cold War period. If the United States is determined to launch a new global cold war against China, and if Israel is

determined to follow the US lead in efforts to contain and suppress China, the uncertainty in future Sino-Israeli bilateral relations is bound to increase significantly. As the current US policy towards China is characterised by, in the words of Joseph Nye, “exaggerated fear”, “hysteria” and “overreaction”,<sup>15</sup> China may be forced to adopt more realistic responses in the future. And, in the event of a major international conflict or confrontation between the United States and China in a camp-oriented international society, it will become increasingly difficult for Israel to maintain a balanced policy.

“Sino-Israeli relations are more likely to enter a new period of lull in the foreseeable future, with the two countries maintaining pragmatic economic and political engagement despite increasing friction.”

## How Can China and Israel Maintain Their Bilateral Relations?

Due to the factors mentioned above, there is increasing pressure on China and Israel to maintain the first scenario; the prospects for further deepening bilateral relations in the short term are relatively limited. However, unless there is a major international conflict soon that would change the external environment for both countries, the possibility of the third scenario materialising – i.e., a complete freeze or confrontation between the two countries – is also limited. Thus, bilateral relations are more likely to enter a new period of lull in the foreseeable future, with

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “What Could Cause a US-China War?” *The Project Syndicate*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/what-could-cause-us-china-war-by-joseph-s-nye-2021-03>; Joseph S. Nye, “Between Complacency and Hysteria”, *The China-US Focus*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/between-complacency-and-hysteria>.

the two countries maintaining pragmatic economic and political engagement despite increasing friction.

What can the two countries do for the development of bilateral relations in the current environment?

“The competition between the United States and China will be a long-lasting strategic competition, and it may not be wise [for Israel] to choose sides prematurely, certainly not only at the expense of Israel’s own interests.”

For Israel, the most immediate and realistic question that needs to be answered is: does Israel have to choose sides between China and the United States? Although Israel is heavily dependent on the United States for its security and defence strategy, this does not mean that it must take sides between the United States and China. Firstly, the current US containment policy towards China goes far beyond traditional great power competition. The US restrictions on China in the field of hi-tech are neither consistent with the laws of a market economy nor related to the free trade principles that the United States has always touted; the essence of the policy choices facing Israel is whether the West will allow a non-Western developing country to rise in a peaceful manner. The competition between the United States and China will be a long-lasting strategic competition, and it may not be wise to choose sides prematurely, certainly not only at the expense of Israel’s own interests. Secondly, Israel, together with China, needs to learn from the history of their bilateral relations. There has never been any direct conflict of interests between China and Israel, and the relationship is largely due to the ability of the leaders of both countries to put aside ideology and engage in dialogue and cooperation in a pragmatic manner. Finally, the Israeli strategic community needs to develop a genuine understanding of Chinese traditions and culture and be more strategic and innovative in its

approach to China. The Israeli media and strategic community need to move away from total dependence on Western media coverage and information about China, which is highly selective and misleading and does not reflect realities in China. Some scholars have already pointed out that the United States is pursuing a deliberate “coordinated media campaign” against China, which they refer to as “propaganda fog”.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the Israeli media and strategic community needs more direct access to information in Chinese and a genuine understanding of Chinese society and culture.

**“If China abandons its steady, pragmatic stance under Western siege and pressure and moves away from its traditional balanced diplomacy in this region, some countries will inevitably join the US-led anti-China camp.”**

For China, it is necessary to address the realistic question of what kind of Middle East policy it is prepared to adopt in the changing international environment. Firstly, China’s Middle East policy, like that of Israel’s, requires more strategic innovation in response to the changing international environment. If China abandons its steady, pragmatic stance under Western siege and pressure and moves away from its traditional balanced diplomacy in this region, some countries will inevitably join the US-led anti-China camp. Secondly, China should not only refrain from standing in the way of Middle Eastern countries taking sides between the United States and itself, if they so desire, but should also respect their strategic autonomy and choices if such choices do not endanger China’s core interests. Finally, China needs to explore more

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<sup>14</sup> Shalom Salomon Wald, “Must Israel ‘support Washington to face down Beijing?’”; Shalom Salomon Wald, “China, the American Challenge and the Implications for Israel and the Jewish People”; Graphika, *Unheard Voice, Evaluating Five Years of Pro-Western covert Influence Operations*, Stanford Internet Observatory, 24 August 2022.

actively how it can turn its existing influence into a positive force for regional affairs. At present, China's influence in the Middle East is largely confined to the economic sphere, and it still adheres to the principle of non-interference in regional political and security affairs. As expectations of China's involvement in regional affairs grow, China needs to adopt a more proactive approach to regional affairs, while avoiding the mistakes of Western colonialism and hegemonic ambitions. ◆

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the institution to which he is affiliated.



# Israel and American-Chinese Rivalry

## An Israeli Perspective

Ehud Eiran\*

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The rise and fall of great powers and great power competition have been central to Israeli foreign policy, and before it, to Zionist foreign policy. But Israel has not been a major front of the US-China power struggle although American concerns slowed down Israeli-Chinese relations in the 1950s, halted both countries' military ties in the early 2000s, and have recently placed limits on Israeli technology transfers to Beijing and to aspects of Israeli-Chinese economic ties. Israel and China have generally been effective in identifying new grounds for cooperation each time the United States blocked aspects of their cooperation, but whether they can continue to do so remains to be seen. Nevertheless, although there are conflicting pressures, Israel is generally far closer to the United States and is expected to remain so.

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### Israeli Foreign Policy and Great Power Competition

**T**he fortunes of great powers – their rise and fall, as well as great power rivalry – have been a core concern for Israeli foreign policymakers, and before them, of Zionist foreign policymakers.

Zionism's initial efforts, in the late 19th century, were aimed mostly at the great powers in an effort to secure international legitimacy for the Jewish plight for land. Till today, Israel celebrates the British Balfour declaration of 2 November 1917, which viewed favourably the development of a Jewish national home in what was then Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Israel sees the 29 November 1947 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (II), which called for the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state, as the main source of its international legitimacy. All these events resulted from great power competition and, indeed, in some cases, great power war. The Ottoman defeat in 1917 led to British control of the land. London's commitment, as formulated in the Balfour Declaration, paved the way for the Jewish immigration that followed and the creation of a set of proto-state institutions that would evolve into a fully recognised state in 1948. US and Soviet calculations in the context of the Cold War led both these powers to break with their confrontational pattern and vote in favour of the 1947 partition resolution, each believing that a Jewish state would serve its own interests.

**“US pressure on Israel regarding the latter’s relations with China has become more pronounced in the past few years.”**

Later, British and French decline in the Middle East led the United Kingdom and France to support Israel against its Arab foes,

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<sup>1</sup> Knesset News, “Knesset to Hold International Conference Marking the 100th Anniversary of the Balfour Declaration”, 31 October 2017, [https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/Pr13611\\_pg.aspx](https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/Pr13611_pg.aspx); Knesset News, “Immigration Committee Marks 100th Anniversary of the Balfour Declaration; MK Neguse, Chairman: ‘We Had to Realize Our Connection to the Homeland on Our Own’”, 7 November 2017, [https://m.knesset.gov.il/en/news/pressreleases/pages/pr13620\\_pg.aspx](https://m.knesset.gov.il/en/news/pressreleases/pages/pr13620_pg.aspx)

culminating in a joint armed operation against Egypt in 1956. By the late 1960s, active Soviet support for Israel's Arab foes, Syria and Egypt, was an important driver of the Israeli-American alliance. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s strengthened Israel's position in the region and contributed to Arab willingness to negotiate with Israel in the Madrid and Oslo peace processes.

Against this background, it is clear that Israel's decision-makers would need to pay close attention to any change in the global balance of power, and specifically, the prospect of an American-Chinese confrontation. As I will show below, US pressure on Israel regarding the latter's relations with China has become more pronounced in the past few years. Perhaps all small states feel similar pressures. However, Israelis are particularly sensitive to such pressure for three reasons. First, for many years – though less so now – Israelis felt that their state was not fully legitimate in the eyes of large sectors of the international community and that any legitimacy they enjoyed was largely determined by the great powers.

Second, surrounded by armed foes, and fighting five major wars during its first 25 years, Israel saw great power military and political support as a core aspect of its national security doctrine. Finally, Israel defines itself as the nation state of the Jewish people, and some half of world Jewry resides in the United States, one of the great powers vying in the competition for dominance.

## **Israel's Relations with the United States and China**

### **US-Israel Relations**

The United States has been Israel's closest ally for at least five decades. The pre-state Zionist leadership understood the importance of American support for its quest for statehood during the 1940s and focused much of its lobbying efforts on Washington. Indeed, the United States was the first country to recognise Israel shortly after its establishment in 1948. However, the close alliance between the two emerged only in the late

1960s, driven by Israel's rise to regional power, Washington's Cold War calculations, and a more significant commitment of American Jews to support Israel.

Five decades later, the United States supports Israel militarily with generous aid, cooperates with it on regional security issues, and protects Israel diplomatically, mostly at the United Nations and in other arenas. The alliance is often described as built on three pillars. First, both countries share a similar view of the Middle East, with a preference for maintaining the status quo and preventing the rise of Iran and its proxies that challenge it. Second, both countries share a commitment to democracy and highlight its role as a common cement for their alliance. This pillar has been somewhat challenged in the last few years. The administration of President Donald Trump (2017–2021) was a close ally of Israel but seemed less committed to liberal democracy at home, and to democracy being a basis for America's relations abroad. Similarly, the current Israeli government is trying, as these lines are being written, to change aspects of Israel's constitutional order in a manner that is deemed by the administration of President Joe Biden as weakening Israel's commitment to liberal democracy. The third pillar of the alliance is the six million or so Jews who reside in the United States. Israel, seeing itself as the nation state of all Jewish people, has to be attentive to its relations with the United States, as it is the home of the largest Jewish community outside Israel. At the same time, the American Jewish community has played an effective role in lobbying the US government (mostly in Congress) to extend support to Israel.

## Sino-Israeli Relations

Israel, under the rule of the socialist party Mapai, was the first Middle Eastern country to recognise the People's Republic of China soon after it was founded. However, the two countries did not move forward to establish diplomatic relations then. In the early 1950s, Israel was concerned that close relations with Beijing would not be viewed favourably in Washington, and by the mid-1950s China had become close to the Arab nations. In the late 1970s, Israel and China began

cooperating in secret, with Israeli arms industries assisting in the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army of China. Among other things, it is rumoured that the plans and technology for the scrapped Israeli jet, the LAVI, were sold to China and served as the basis for the latter's fourth-generation jet, the J-10.<sup>2</sup>

**“Seen from Israel, the heart of its relations with China was, and still is, economics.”**

In the late 1980s, Israel and China moved towards opening up diplomatic relations, first, through the Israeli consulate in Hong Kong, and by 1992 establishing full-fledged diplomatic relations. Seen from Israel, the heart of its relations with China was, and still is, economics. In the 1990s and early 2000s several military deals were considered, but these were halted under American pressure. In 2000, Israel withdrew from an agreement to supply China with a retrofitted Russian plane (the Phalcon) that would have provided Beijing with an advanced airborne early-warning capability. In 2005, Israel stopped servicing Chinese-owned Israel-made drones (the Harpy) under US pressure. As far as is publicly known, this episode sealed direct arms deals between Israel and China.

Economic relations between the two expanded throughout the 1990s and the first decades of the 2000s. Between 2000 and 2010, some 3,200 Israeli entities were engaged in exporting goods and services to China. In 2010, total Israeli exports to China amounted to US\$1.8 billion, while exports from China to Israel amounted to US\$4.7 billion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Haaretz, “Pakistan Purchases Chinese Jets Based on Scrapped Israeli Lavi Fighter”, *Haaretz*, 5 January, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/asia-and-australia/2022-01-05/ty-article/pakistan-purchases-chinese-jets-based-on-scrapped-israeli-lavi-fighter/0000017f-f71b-d887-a7ff-ffffa08e0000>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Trade, Industry and Employment, Israel, “Exports of Goods and Industrial Products from Israel to China, in the Last Decade”, 2010, <https://employment.molsa.gov.il/Research/Documents/X10560.pdf>

Once elected in 2009, the Netanyahu government sought to further expand its economic relations with Beijing, sensing that Israel was not taking full advantage of the vast China market. With enthusiastic support from both governments, Israeli-Chinese economic cooperation expanded dramatically. The Israeli cabinet took a number of decisions to this effect. In May 2013, it decided to expand support for the hi-tech industry so that it would be better able to compete in the Chinese (as well as Indian and Brazilian) markets.<sup>4</sup> In the same month, Prime Minister Netanyahu visited China, and following his meeting with the then Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, the Israeli cabinet decided on 19 May 2013 to prioritise economic relations with China. The cabinet decision set up high-level committees – involving both elected officials and senior civil servants – to lead and supervise this effort.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, both states signed an agreement to advance joint projects in research, innovation, education, health and culture. The agreement was followed by the establishment of a bilateral forum intended to carry the vision forward.

“In the 1990s and early 2000s several military deals were considered, but these were halted under American pressure.”

The forum – headed by the Chinese vice president and Israel’s foreign minister – met in early 2022 for the fifth time.<sup>6</sup> In the same year, the

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<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, Israel, “Decision 155: Strengthening Economic Relations with China, Brazil and India”, 13 May 2013,

[https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2013\\_des155](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2013_des155)

<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, Israel, “Decision 251: Strengthening economic relations with China”, 19 May 2013, [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2013\\_dec251](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2013_dec251)

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel, “The China-Israel Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation Convenes for the Fifth Time”, 24 January 2022, <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/china-israel-joint-committee-on-innovation-cooperation-convenes-for-fifth-time-24-jan-2022>

cabinet's committee for the expansion of economic relations with China offered a detailed plan for achieving its goals.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016, both countries launched talks for a free trade agreement (FTA), which would eliminate tariffs on most goods traded between the two countries, further boosting trade and investment. However, the agreement has not been concluded yet, in part because Washington is signalling its concern over the implications of a possible agreement on the transfer of Israeli technologies to China.<sup>8</sup> Following a meeting in 2017, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Xi Jinping announced an innovative comprehensive partnership. The new partnership was aimed at expanding cooperation in agriculture, investment, finance and medical services. Special emphasis was given to environmental technologies, including pollution control, waste management, environmental monitoring, and water conservation and purification. Specifically, the partnership was envisioned to include exchanges among young technological personnel, cooperation in joint laboratories, innovation parks, the setting up of a global technology transfer centre, and an innovative cooperation centre.

**“As is the case with many other states that trade with China, Israel suffers a trade deficit, with only a third of the trade being Israeli exports.”**

These initiatives may have led to the dramatic expansion in trade between the two countries that has been evident in the past few years. At the beginning of the new millennium, two-way trade amounted to about

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<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister's Office, Israel, "Decision 1687: A Plan to Expand and Enhance Economic Relations Between Israel and China, 5 June 2014, [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2014\\_dec1687](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2014_dec1687)

<sup>8</sup> Sean Mathews, "US-China Tensions Cloud Israel Free Trade Deal", *Middle East Eye*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/US-China-tensions-cloud-Israel-free-trade-deal>

US\$1.07 billion. By 2020, the figure was more than tenfold higher, at US\$11.9 billion, or about 10% of total Israeli trade with the world.

“Yet, with all the Chinese engagement, investments from China amounted to just 6% of total foreign direct investments in Israel between 2012 and 2021, compared with 64% for US investments.”

As is the case with many other states that trade with China, Israel suffers a trade deficit, with only a third of the trade being Israeli exports.<sup>9</sup> Chinese investments in Israel show patterns that are evident in both the developed and developing worlds. Chinese companies were engaged in the construction of infrastructure such as the tunnels under Mt. Carmel, a section of the Ashdod harbour, and a light rail project (the red line) in Tel Aviv. They also operate infrastructure, most notably, a portion of the Haifa harbour. Chinese companies have also invested directly in Israeli companies. They bought traditional corporations such as Tnuva (dairy) and Machteshim-Agam/Adama (chemicals). There were also significant Chinese investments in Israeli start-ups and venture capital firms, although this trend seemed to have peaked in 2018 and has been on the decline since then. The decline may be due in part to concerns among many Israeli companies that Chinese involvement might create future difficulties for sales in the American market. Yet, with all the Chinese engagement, investments from China amounted to just 6% of total foreign direct investments in Israel between 2012 and 2021, compared with 64% for US investments.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Doron Ella, “Trade in Goods and Services Between Israel and China in the Era of COVID-19”, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), December 2021,

<sup>10</sup> Government of Israel, “The Consultative Committee for Vetting Aspects of National Security in Foreign Investments”, September 2022,

[https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/publish-adviser-committee-activity-2021/he/Publishes\\_publish-adviser-committee-activity-2021-file.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/publish-adviser-committee-activity-2021/he/Publishes_publish-adviser-committee-activity-2021-file.pdf)



Beyond the economic focus, China took some limited steps in the political arena. It convened Israeli-Palestinian “seminars”, which were, in effect, high-level track-two efforts to keep the Israeli-Palestinian political engagement going. The meetings, however, caught little attention and seemed mostly to reflect Beijing’s interest to project an image of a responsible international player, rather than commit the resources to enter the complicated Israeli-Palestinian arena. Israel presumably also follows the emerging relationship between China and Iran, the latter being Israel’s main regional challenger.<sup>11</sup> However, there are very few public statements about the matter,<sup>12</sup> possibly indicating that Israel understands that it has little leverage over Beijing in this matter.

## US-China Competition and Israel’s Response

Starting in the late 2010s, US-Chinese competition grew more pronounced. The Trump administration designated China as a challenger to US dominance and began executing policies intended to contain Beijing. The Biden administration has followed suit and similarly defined China, in the words of Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, as the “most serious long-term challenge to the international order”.<sup>13</sup> After it had successfully put a halt to Israeli-Chinese arms deals in the early 2000s, Washington moved to curb aspects of Chinese economic activity between Israel and China. As in the early 2000s, American concerns revolved mostly around possible technology transfers from Israel to China.

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<sup>11</sup> Ehud Eiran and Martin Malin, “The Sum of all Fears: Israel’s Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran”, *The Washington Quarterly* 36.3, 2013, pp. 77–89

<sup>12</sup> For an exception see Ministry of Intelligence, Israel, “The Minister of Intelligence in the Opening of the Israel-China Center: We Expect China to Help Against Iran”, 1 August 2022, <https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/china010822>

<sup>13</sup> Anthony J. Blinken, “Speech: The Administration’s Approach to the PRC”, 26 May 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

Under American pressure, the Israeli cabinet announced in October 2019 that it would be setting up a board to vet foreign investments in the Israeli economy. The decision did not refer to any specific country, but it was aimed primarily at Chinese investments in Israel. In its original formulation, the board's remit was rather limited in scope. Israeli regulators could choose whether to refer matters to the board, and its function was only consultative. Regulators were not committed to acting upon the board's recommendations.<sup>14</sup> In October 2022, the Israeli government strengthened the authority of the board. Earlier, in July 2022 President Biden and Israel's then prime minister, Yair Lapid, announced the establishment of a "strategic dialogue on advanced technologies" headed by their respective national security advisers.

**“The United States also signalled its displeasure with Chinese investments in Israeli infrastructure projects. ... In the last few years, Chinese companies did lose at least two major bids for infrastructure projects in Israel.”**

The United States also signalled its displeasure with Chinese investments in Israeli infrastructure projects – most notably, over the fact that a Chinese operator, Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG), will be operating a portion of Haifa port. American displeasure, and possible pressure, did not lead to a change in Israeli policy in this case. However, in the last few years, Chinese companies did lose at least two major bids for infrastructure projects in Israel. In 2020, a Hong Kong-based corporation, Hutchison Water, lost a tender for a large desalination project (Soreq 2). Shortly before the decision, the then US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, visited Israel and seemed to have signalled an

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Finance, Israel, “The Consultative Committee for Vetting Aspects of National Security in Foreign Investments, 23 January 2020, <https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/foreign-investment-board>

American preference for the Chinese company not to be awarded the tender.<sup>15</sup> In early 2022, a Chinese company, China Railway Construction Corporation Limited (CRCC) was disqualified from a bid to develop two light rail lines together with Israeli partners. This was despite the fact that the company was already engaged in the development of another section of the light rail project and had in fact submitted the lowest bid. In the legal proceedings that unfolded later, it emerged that Israeli officials were indeed concerned by the involvement of the Chinese company, although it is not clear whether the concern was a result of American pressure or internal Israeli concerns.<sup>16</sup> Israeli observers suspect that American pressure manifests itself in other ways. For example, some analysts argue that the American pressure to limit Israeli cyber companies involved in developing offensive technologies is motivated by fear that their technology would be used by China against the United States and its allies.<sup>17</sup>

“Israel’s approach, at least under the previous Netanyahu governments was to try to hold the stick on both ends: remain a close strategic ally of the United States, but also strengthen economic ties with China.”

Israeli policy regarding competition could be summarised as follows. First, almost 20 years ago, Israel accepted the American demand

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<sup>15</sup> Amiram Barkat, “IDE wins Sorek 2 Desalination Tender amid US Pressure”, 26 May 2020, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-ide-wins-sorek-2-desalination-tender-after-us-pressure-1001330178>

<sup>16</sup> Golan Hazani, “The State reveals how much It Feared the Chinese Winning the Light Rail Tender in Tel Aviv”, YNET, 31 May 2022, <https://www.ynet.co.il/economy/article/sk1qtjqo9>

<sup>17</sup> Amos Harel, “The Iran File Is Being Transferred to Netanyahu and Galant, but the Worrying Signs Are Coming from a Different Direction”, *Haaretz*, 1 January 2023, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2022-12-30/ty-article/.highlight/00000185-5f99-d819-a995-ffb908ac0000>

to halt any sales of security-related items, mostly technology, to China. Second, Israel's approach, at least under the previous Netanyahu governments (2009–2021) was to try to hold the stick on both ends: remain a close strategic ally of the United States, but also strengthen economic ties with China. However, three trends are complicating the ability to maintain this strategy. First, the growing enmity between Washington and Beijing led to US pressure on Israel to restrict aspects of its economic engagement with China. The second is the securitisation of privately developed technologies. As Israel's appeal to China, at least in part, is the former's technological prowess, and because Washington sees its competition with China also as centred on technologies, Israel is bound to face even growing US pressure regarding business with China. Third, and to a lesser degree, the war in Ukraine has contributed to the American depiction of its competition with China as having an ideological element: the free world vs. the powers that aim to disrupt it and threaten freedom. Israel was able to remain on the sidelines in the Ukraine context, but the further the global competition is coloured in ideological claims, the greater will be the pressure on Israel to restrict relations with China.

“Israel was able to remain on the sidelines in the Ukraine context, but the further the global competition is coloured in ideological claims, the greater will be the pressure on Israel to restrict relations with China.”

One manifestation in Israel of this tension arising from growing US-China enmity is the different responses to US pressure. The dominant voices, reflecting the proximity of the Israeli foreign and defence establishments to the United States, tend to accept American concerns. As a leading analyst on the issue, Brig Gen (Res) Asaf Orion wrote recently, “Jerusalem doesn't have to choose between Washington

and Beijing, because it's already chosen the former.”<sup>18</sup> Some even suggest that China can be an intrinsic threat to Israel, separate from American concerns. Others, in the same vein, accept the American concerns but warn against following Washington blindly, or would like to secure some American side payments in return for limiting economic (mostly technological) engagement with China.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, some voices in the economic arena suggest that Israel should continue to engage China economically and try to benefit from its rise, especially regarding deals that were already agreed upon.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this approach was generally accepted regarding the Chinese operation of a portion of Haifa harbour, which despite US displeasure, is still operated by a Chinese company.

## Conclusion

The evolution of Israeli-Chinese relations highlights three issues. First, since the early days of Israel-China interactions in the 1950s, the United States was a central factor in Israeli decision-making in this regard. American concerns slowed down Israeli-Chinese relations in the 1950s, halted both countries' military ties in the early 2000s, and has now placed limits on Israeli technology transfers to Beijing. Israel and China were generally effective in identifying new arenas for cooperation that did not challenge the United States. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to continue doing so now, in the face of American pressure to limit exchanges on technology between the two.

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<sup>18</sup> Assaf Orion, “No, Israel Isn't Falling Into China's Orbit”, *Mosaic*, 6 September 2022, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/israel-zionism/2022/09/no-israel-isnt-falling-into-chinas-orbit/>

<sup>19</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, “The US is Wrong in its Approach to China – and Israel Might Pay the Price”, *Ha’Zira*, July 2022, <https://www.arenajournal.org.il/single-post/issue11-shichor-israel-china-usa>

<sup>20</sup> Shlomit Lan, “The Chinese Are Not Overtaking Israel’s Ports”, *Globes*, 15 December, 2018, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001264448>

Second, although Israel faced American pressure over the years regarding its relations with China, the issue had not become a major front of the American-Chinese competition. This is in contrast to the heydays of the Cold War, when hot wars between US and Soviet proxies – Israel and major Arab states, respectively – threatened to drag the world to a global, possibly nuclear, exchange.

Finally, although some seasoned analysts frame the question as that involving “Israel between China and the United States”,<sup>21</sup> Israel is not expected to move away from the American camp. For now, China cannot serve as a substitute to US support for Israel. Moreover, with about half of the Jewish people outside Israel residing in the United States, the latter will remain a central focus of Israeli foreign relations. ◆

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ilai Saltzman, “Israel Remains Caught Between China and the United States – Opinion”, *Jerusalem Post*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-719076>

# Navigating Asian Rivalries

## Israel's ties with China and India

Nicolas Blarel\*

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Over the past three decades, Israel has increasingly pivoted towards Asia, especially in pursuing economic and defence relations with India and China. While much attention has been given to US criticism of growing China-Israel ties, especially in the sensitive spheres of defence and technological cooperation, there have been few studies of how Israel has carefully calibrated its rapprochement with the two Asian rivals over the past three decades, especially in the face of the varying pulls and pressures in an increasingly multipolar and competitive Indo-Pacific environment. How has Israel been able to hedge and gain from cooperation with both Asian rivals without being caught up in zero sum calculations?

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While much emphasis in recent times has been on India and China's rapprochement with the Arab Gulf states or their relations with Iran, the two countries' growing ties with Israel have received less attention. The US media though has been increasingly concerned about Chinese investments in Israel. Over the past three decades, Israel has increasingly pivoted towards Asia, especially in the realm of economic and defence relations with India and China. China's

bilateral trade with Israel grew from US\$50 million in 1992 to US\$15 billion in 2020, making it Israel's largest trading partner in Asia and its third largest trading partner in the world after the European Union and the United States. From 2011 to 2021, the share of Israeli exports to Asia going to China rose from 25% to 42%.<sup>1</sup> India's trade with Israel too has grown, rising from US\$200 million in annual trade in 1992 to US\$7 billion in 2022, and these figures do not include India's important but more secretive defence purchases from Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Defence ties are an important dimension in this rapprochement, although it is India that has mostly benefited from close military ties with Israel, while progress in defence ties between Israel and China has traditionally been complicated due to the United States' close monitoring of this relationship. While much attention has been given to US criticisms of growing China-Israel ties, especially in the sensitive spheres of defence and technological cooperation, there have been few studies of how Israel has carefully calibrated its rapprochement with both these Asian rivals over the past three decades. For instance, in March 2017, Israel's then prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed a comprehensive partnership with China, just weeks before hosting prime minister Narendra Modi's maiden visit to Israel. However, the United States has also increasingly raised concerns about China's growing role in Israel's critical infrastructure and hi-tech sectors, and instead favoured Indian investments in Israel, notably through the new I2U2 minilateral partnership involving the United Arab Emirates, apart from the United States, India and Israel.

This paper looks at how Israel has been able to hedge and gain from cooperation with both these Asian rivals and the future challenges that Israel is likely to encounter as it seeks to maintain good ties with

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<sup>1</sup> Ehud Eilam, "Israel and China: The Bloom Is Off the Rose", Middle East Institute (Washington DC), 1 December 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/israel-and-china-bloom-rose>

<sup>2</sup> ANI, "India-Israel bilateral trade close to USD 8 billion, says Israeli envoy", ANI News, 8 December 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-israel-bilateral-trade-close-to-usd-8-billion-says-israeli-envoy20221208235609/>



both countries in an increasingly multipolar and competitive Indo-Pacific environment.

## Estrangement and Normalisation

After independence, the primary goal of Israel was to ensure its survival as a full-fledged state. One effort towards achieving this goal was military, i.e., ensuring its external defence, and the other diplomatic, i.e., gaining international recognition from a majority of states. Initially, India and the People Republic of China developed robust pro-Palestinian stances and neither of them established diplomatic ties with Israel until the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Notably, both condemned Israel for the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt during the Suez crisis in 1956. Earlier, in 1950, India had officially recognised Israel but it refrained from establishing diplomatic relations. Nonetheless, Israel lobbied India for improved ties and succeeded when India opened an embassy in Tel Aviv in 1992.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Israel did not see ties with China as a diplomatic priority, viewing China as a distant player at the political, military and economic levels.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the absence of diplomatic ties in the 1960s and 1970s, the Indian and Chinese militaries and defence industries developed an appreciation for Israel's national defence systems and doctrines, whose effectiveness was demonstrated in the Arab-Israeli wars despite long periods of military embargoes. This appreciation led to small-scale arms procurements from Israel: India acquired mortars and ammunition during its conflicts with Pakistan, and China reportedly cooperated with Israel on missile and aviation technology.<sup>6</sup> Military sales to China partly

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity, Change, and Compromise since 1922* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy*.

<sup>5</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *The Middle East in China's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy*; Shichor, *Israel's Military Transfers to China and Taiwan*, *Survival* 40 (1998): 68–91, doi: [10.1093/survival/40.1.68](https://doi.org/10.1093/survival/40.1.68)

helped Israel's defence-industrial complex address the rising costs of its indigenous military output.

A series of political developments in the early 1990s, such as the Gulf War and the emerging Oslo peace process, encouraged India and China to establish diplomatic relations with Israel within a few days of each other in January 1992. Normalisation of ties helped the two Asian powers develop stronger defence and economic relations with Israel. In parallel, some of Israel's defence industries pushed for stronger ties with China and India to make up for the loss of orders from NATO and South Africa: NATO's West European members drastically cut their military acquisitions following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, while South Africa's post-apartheid government chose to dissociate itself from Israel.

A series of political developments in the early 1990s, e.g., the Gulf War and the emerging Oslo peace process, encouraged India and China to establish diplomatic relations with Israel within a few days of each other in January 1992.

Meanwhile, in the post-Tiananmen context, the United States was closely monitoring Sino-Israeli military ties. Since Israel benefited from important financial and technical support from Washington, the United States was a de facto veto player over Israeli defence sales to third countries. Israel was then accused of unauthorised and even illegal transfers of technology supplied or funded by the United States, notably Patriot anti-missile technology, to China, an allegation which was directly investigated by the United States. Citing security threats to American forces, Washington also blocked China's planned US\$1 billion purchase of Israel's Phalcon airborne warning and control system (AWACs).<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> Shichor, *Israel's Military Transfers to China and Taiwan*.

2000, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak announced the cancellation of the deal.

In contrast, Israel's defence ties with India had no such constraints but moved at a slow pace in the 1990s due to domestic political opposition within India to engaging too closely with Israel. However, the electoral victory of a coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1998 and the 1999 Kargil war led India to accelerate defence transactions with Israel, culminating in the purchase of nine Barak-I AMD systems and missiles from IAI (Israel Aerospace Industries) and Rafael Advanced Defense Systems in February 2001. In 2003, three years after the United States had blocked the sale of Phalcons to China, Israel, in coordination with the United States, started negotiations for the sale of three such AWACs to India. Washington's positive attitude towards New Delhi has enabled Israel to develop a substantial defence partnership with India and to become its third largest defence supplier. The increase of Israeli arms sales to India over the past two decades has also made India the largest export market for Israeli defence products and a partner for the joint production of defence systems.<sup>8</sup>

## Israel's Asia Pivot

Over the past two decades, China and India's dependence on petroleum and other raw materials from the Middle East, as well as their sustained economic growth, has gradually made the two countries a major destination for exports from Middle Eastern states. China has also become an important source of investment in the region – as has India, albeit to a lesser extent. China has become the most important trade partner for most countries in the Middle East, mainly as a supplier of goods. Sino-Israeli economic relations have also progressed over the past decade, now exceeding US\$15 billion, while China reportedly invested a

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<sup>8</sup> Rahul Singh, "India, Israel to Work on 10-year Roadmap for Defence Cooperation", *Hindustan Times*, 29 October 2021.

total of US\$12.9 billion in Israeli infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

India and China's growing key interests in the Middle East have been forcing them to rethink the tools they can develop to support their interests and roles in the region in a more expansive way. It is critical to understand this role transition for India and China and how it has interacted with Israel's own foreign policy aspirations over the past decade. Under Netanyahu's extended stint as prime minister from 2009 to 2021, Israel embraced growing engagement of developing markets like China and India to diversify its export destinations and limit its traditional dependence on ties with Western partners. However, given the deadlock in the negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with India since 2010, Netanyahu's government launched free trade negotiations with China in 2013, notably to ensure greater access for Israeli companies to the Chinese market and to ease Chinese foreign direct investments in Israel.

### Israel's focus shifted to cooperation with China in less sensitive economic and technological sectors rather than defence ties, which were under close US scrutiny.

Israel's focus shifted to cooperation with China in less sensitive economic and technological sectors rather than defence ties, which were under close US scrutiny. The two countries established the Israel-China Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation. Netanyahu travelled to Beijing in March 2017 to mark the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties and both countries agreed to raise the status of the relationship to a "Comprehensive Innovation Partnership". Netanyahu declared during the visit that good ties between the countries were like "a

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<sup>9</sup> Shira Efron, Karen Schwindt, and Emily Haskel, *Chinese Investment in Israeli Technology and Infrastructure: Security Implications for Israel and the United States*, RAND Corporation, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3176.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3176.html)

marriage made in heaven”. (Interestingly, Netanyahu used the same label to frame India-Israel ties during his visit to New Delhi in January 2018).

In reaction to these outreach initiatives from Israel, China increasingly saw Israel as a source of innovative R&D technologies and as a strategic outpost in its regional interests – a small but vital stopover under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a land bridge connecting trade and energy routes between East Asia through the Middle East and North Africa and onto Europe. As a result, Chinese companies have expanded their investments in Israeli infrastructure projects since 2009. The involvement of China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation in the construction of the Carmel tunnels and a railway line from Eilat to Ashdod, and the involvement of Shanghai International Port Group in the management of the Northern Haifa Bayport Terminal have helped connect the Red and Mediterranean Seas, providing an alternative route to the Suez Canal for China. Beyond these infrastructural investments, Chinese agro-business companies have also acquired Israeli firms. China National Chemical Corporation acquired Israeli pesticide manufacturer Adama Agricultural Solutions in 2011 and Bright Foods acquired Tnuva, Israel’s biggest food processing cooperative, in 2014.

**Washington has expressed concerns that China is gaining too much ground in Israel’s infrastructural projects and sectors involving dual-use technologies.**

In reaction, Washington has expressed concerns that China is gaining too much ground in Israel’s infrastructural projects and sectors involving dual-use technologies. Under American pressure, the Israeli government formed an advisory committee to weigh the national security

aspects of prospective foreign investments in Israeli companies.<sup>10</sup>

In light of these pressures from the United States and in an effort to diversify Israel's Asian partnerships, Netanyahu pushed for increased engagement of India, building on a perceived window of opportunity linked to the election of a pro-Israel Narendra Modi in 2014.

A more benign perception, especially in Washington, of India's increasing presence in the Middle East has permitted Israel to actively promote economic relations and invest in India, but also to develop strategic and defence ties.

Breaking with their previous caution in drawing attention to the partnership over the past decade, the two leaders have actively publicised their commercial and defence relationship. In July 2017, Modi notably became the first sitting Indian prime minister to visit Tel Aviv. This visit was soon reciprocated by a visit by Netanyahu to New Delhi in January 2018. A more benign perception, especially in Washington, of India's increasing presence in the Middle East has permitted Israel to actively promote economic relations and invest in India, but also to develop strategic and defence ties. For instance, Israel awarded the tender for the privatisation of the original Haifa port (separate from but located next to the Chinese-operated Northern Haifa Bayport Terminal) to the Indian conglomerate Adani Group despite competing Chinese bids for the project.<sup>11</sup> Defence ties between India and Israel have also expanded

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Scheer, "With Eye to China, Israel Forms Panel to Vet Foreign Investments", Reuters, 30 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-investment-panel-idUSKBN1X926T>

<sup>11</sup> Azad Essa, "Haifa Port, Gautam Adani and Israel's Plan for the Middle East", *Middle East Eye*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/israel-india-haifa-port-adani-what-tells-middle-east-plans>.

under Modi's tenure, with India buying 250 SPIKE 2000 bombs from Rafael as well as surveillance drones and Spike anti-tank guided missiles.<sup>12</sup>

## Looking Forward: Transactional Pivot or Strategic Hedging?

Since the Israeli government changed its policy towards China in 2013, much of its diplomatic efforts have been directed towards promoting economic relations: the rising trade volume and the diversity of Chinese investments indicate strengthening economic ties. The relationship has been mainly based on narrow national interests and not on common values or shared regional or international interests. Similarly, while Netanyahu and Modi have advertised their personal and ideological chemistry, the relations have not diversified beyond defence procurement and some cooperation in the agricultural sector. Negotiations for a FTA have remained deadlocked for more than a decade (in contrast to India's quick and successful Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations with the UAE). This demonstrates that while Israel is dependent on the Indian defence market to support its costly indigenous defence R&D and production, it also needs the Chinese market and investments to sustain its economic and infrastructural development. Consequently, Israel's pivot to Asia has been limited and transactional in nature: partnerships with China and India have been limited to specific sectors of cooperation in order to maintain Israel's strategic leverage and to ensure that the Israeli leadership does not have to explicitly take sides in the US-China or India-China rivalries.

For both China and India, closer ties with Israel have not led to close diplomatic alignments. In fact, China recently welcomed the

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<sup>12</sup> Amrita Nayak Dutta, "India Stocks up Missile Arsenal as it Prepares for Another Tense Summer in Ladakh", The Print, 31 December 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/india-stocks-up-missile-arsenal-as-it-prepares-for-another-tense-summer-in-ladakh/576386/>

Palestinian Authority's president, Mahmood Abbas.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the Indian government has regularly reasserted its support for the Palestinian Authority, including by inviting Abbas to New Delhi in 2017, and by regularly donating to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. This is in spite of India's abstention from supporting Palestine-sponsored resolutions against Israel at the UN Human Rights Council or the International Court of Justice, and Modi's deliberate decision to avoid making a stop in Ramallah when visiting Israel in 2017.<sup>14</sup> Both India and China have continued to vote for UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions condemning Israel's occupation since 1967 of Arab lands, including East Jerusalem, and in 2017 supported the UNGA vote against then US president Donald Trump's unilateral declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, judging that this decision went against international law and previous UN Security Council resolutions.

## Israel's pivot to Asia has been limited and transactional in nature.

For both Asian powers, the increasing peripheral nature of the Palestinian cause is reflected in the greater priority they accord to deepening ties with Israel. However, a wholesale change from the historical positions taken in multilateral fora will not happen for the two commitment-averse actors. In this context, both Asian powers have welcomed the Abraham Accords. The understanding was that the

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<sup>13</sup> Bethan McKernan, "China's Palestinian Moment is about Global Standing rather than Peace", *The Guardian*, 11 June 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Sakshat Chandok, "Support for Palestine Dwindles as India Refuses to Vote against Israel at the UN", *The Quint*, 5 January 2023,

<https://www.thequint.com/news/world/india-abstains-un-resolution-icj-opinion-palestine-rights-israel-occupation>; ANI, "India Extends Support to Palestinian People, says PM Modi," 29 November 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-extends-support-to-palestinian-people-says-pm-modi20221129234559/>



accords can lead to a reduction of regional conflicts and further facilitate China's and India's political and commercial ventures in the region, while not having to take sides in intra-regional conflicts. Nevertheless, while both India and China welcomed the agreement, both also reiterated their support for the Palestinian cause.

**As Netanyahu returned as Israel's prime minister in 2022, questions arose over Israel resuming a policy of balancing the different relationships and extracting dividends from partnerships with both Asian powers.**

Growing economic ties with Israel have also not led to a change in China's position with regard to Iran. China initially encouraged Iran to seek an agreement with Europe and the United States aimed at limiting its nuclear weapons capability in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions and the possibility of developing civilian nuclear research. Following President Trump's decision to leave the nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), China and Iran signed an economic and security partnership, clearing the way for Chinese investments in Iran. Beijing also recently brokered the normalisation of ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, thereby undercutting efforts to isolate the Iranian government.

As Netanyahu returned as Israel's prime minister in December 2022, questions arose over Israel resuming a policy of balancing the different relationships and extracting dividends from partnerships with both Asian powers. For instance, in a recent meeting with members of

the US Congress, Netanyahu mentioned a “projected visit” to China without disclosing when the trip would take place.<sup>15</sup>

Over the past five years, tensions between China and the United States, but also between India and China, have intensified. Not only have President Trump’s sanctions on China remained in place under President Joe Biden, but they have been escalated to unprecedented levels. US concerns over Israel’s hi-tech cooperation with China have increased, especially in areas like artificial intelligence and chip design. Israel is conscious that 60% of its trade is still with the United States and that if China-Israel relations deepen, China’s leverage on Israel will grow. In addition, in pursuing ties with China, Israel will have to consider how such ties are perceived by India. For most of the past decade, Indian leaders did not see the power balance between India and China in zero sum terms. But in the context of deteriorating India-China relations since their border standoff of 2020, India has been paying closer attention to Israel’s relationship with China.

In this increasingly complex international environment, Israel would need to be more careful in its dealings with China or look for strategic hedging alternatives vouched by the United States. Israel has therefore encouraged an influx of lower-risk Indian investments to effectively hedge against China’s intensifying efforts to penetrate the region. In addition, Israel has been able to seize the opportunity initiated by the United States to build common ground with India to counterbalance China, such as through the I2U2 minilateral. ♦

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<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, “Netanyahu says China Has Invited Him for a State Visit”, 27 June 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-china-netanyahu-invitation-us-3a11ce2a1a23e9e415f400ad39772f2e>

published his first book, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity, Change, and Compromise since 1922*, with Oxford University Press in 2015. More recently, he co-edited with Crystal Ennis *The South Asia to Gulf Migration Governance Complex* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

# Emerging Israel-Japan Relations Since the 2010s

## Limited Scope and Future Prospects

*Rotem Kowner\**

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Notwithstanding the flurry of bilateral visits, conclusion of several agreements and the flow of Japanese investments on an unprecedented scale to Israel in recent years, Israel-Japan relations remain largely confined to the economic sphere. The relationship is determined largely by the Japanese side, based on cold calculation of the assets and liabilities that it brings to Japan. Despite the recent change in the economic and geopolitical situation in the Middle East, Japanese policy is still aimed at finding a comfortable balance between the risks that relations with Israel entail in terms of Japan's energy supply from the Gulf states and the political and economic advantages that the relationship may bring.

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**I**sraeli-Japanese relations began to improve substantially from the 2010s onwards, particularly since 2012, when the late Abe Shinzō's second term as prime minister began. Under Abe's eight-year long premiership, Japan implemented a more proactive foreign policy and

forged new alliances,<sup>1</sup> fuelled by the premier's vision of making Japan a great power (again) and growing concerns in Japan about a rising China threat and weakening American presence in Asia. Warming relations with Israel are a component of this new policy although other calculations intrinsic to the Middle East have also come into play and limit Japan's interest in pursuing a radical change in the relationship.

The improvement in Israel-Japan relations can be seen in the frequent exchange of visits by high-ranking officials and the conclusion of several bilateral agreements. Moreover, during the past few years, Israel has become the target of Japanese investments of unprecedented scale. But does the takeoff during the recent decade indicate a true watershed in the 70-year history of lukewarm Israeli-Japanese relations? Moreover, can we expect Japan's new strategic policy announced in December 2022<sup>2</sup> to herald a fundamental change in attitude towards Israel? Based on official documents, media sources and interviews with decision-makers, this paper seeks to analyse the current state of the relationship and the obstacles that stand in the way of deeper relations.

## **A Decade of Change: A Boost in Economic Ties and Beyond**

Starting in 2012, the eight-year period under Prime Minister Abe was characterised by a considerable boost in Israel-Japan relations. Conspicuous in the economic sphere, this upturn seems to have endured following Abe's departure from office in 2020 and well into 2022. There are several components to this shift, most of them the outcome of decisions and actions taken by the Japanese side.

In terms of diplomatic exchanges, the decade of the 2010s was unprecedented, with two visits to Israel by Abe (in 2015 and 2018) and a visit to Japan by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (in 2014). The

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First-Century* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Secretariat, Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan", December 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-c.pdf>

economic focus of the relationship was manifested in several visits by high-ranking representatives of Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). METI ministers, who had never visited Israel before 2014, did so three times within the next five years.<sup>3</sup>

### **Trade and Investments**

Investments, rather than trade, have been the most prominent aspect of the new atmosphere in the relationship during and since Abe's second, third and fourth cabinets (2012–2020). The increase in Japanese investments in Israel and the increasing number of Japanese acquisitions of Israeli companies during this period were spectacular.

“Investments, rather than trade, have been the most prominent aspect of the new atmosphere in the relationship during and since Abe's second, third and fourth cabinets.”

In 2021, Japanese investments, involving 85 deals, reached an all-time record of US\$2.9 billion – a nearly 2,000 per cent jump from the US\$142 million, involving just six deals, recorded in 2012, the year that Abe took office again after a brief tenure earlier.<sup>4</sup> Japanese investments declined in 2022 by almost half the figure for the previous year, but nonetheless constituted 12.8 per cent of total foreign investments in Israel that year.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, by 2022, total Japanese investments during the previous two decades reached about US\$14.5 billion, the vast

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<sup>3</sup> The visits were undertaken in 2014, 2017 and 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Meir Orbach, “Si behashka'ot yapaniyot behavarot Israeliyot be-2021” (Record of Japanese Investments in Israeli Companies). *Calcalist*, 9 January 2022

<sup>5</sup> Harel-Hertz Investment House, “Press Release: Japanese Investments in Israel in 2022 Amounted to \$1.558 Billion”, 9 February 2023.

majority of them flowing since 2016.<sup>6</sup> Japanese investments in the Israeli high-tech industry have been increasing in recent years. Until a decade ago, these investments were relatively marginal, comprising no more than 1–2 per cent of all foreign investments in Israel’s high-tech sector. Since 2020, however, they have jumped to about 10–16 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike investments, bilateral trade has remained sluggish on the whole. During much of the 2010s, Japan was only Israel’s third- or fourth-largest trade partner in Asia, after China and India, and at times even South Korea. Moreover, since 1997, Israel’s trade balance with Japan has been invariably negative, with the deficit reaching a peak of more than US\$1 billion in 2007–2011 and in 2016–2018. The volume of Israeli exports to Japan in the early 2020s was lower than that in 1995–1997 (even in nominal terms). Content-wise, diamonds no longer constitute the main Israeli export as they used to three decades ago – a clear sign of the development and diversification of the Israeli economy.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the stagnation in bilateral trade during the 2010s, and even the decline seen during the last few years, there are some prospects for long-term change. In November 2022, the two countries launched a joint study on the possibility of a Japan-Israel Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), namely, a scheme to create a free trade area. Negotiations are expected to take some two years.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Based on Harel-Hertz Investment House, *Japan Year Book* (Herzliya: Harel-Hertz, 2022), p. 2, <https://www.harel-hertz.com/israel-japan>

<sup>7</sup> Based on Harel-Hertz Investment House, *Japan Year Book*, p. 25; Hidemitsu Kibe, 2016. “Japanese Companies Show Keen Interest in Israeli Startups”, *Nikkei Asia*, 6 December 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Israel Export Institute, “Israel-Japan Economic Survey”, 2019, <https://www.export.gov.il/api//Media/Default/Files/Economy/japanisraelcomrel18.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Hayashi Attends Reception in Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Diplomatic Relations between Japan and Israel”, 22 November 2022, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e\\_000505.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000505.html); Israel Fisher, “Mazda veToyota yihiyu zolot yoter” (Mazda and Toyota Will Be Cheaper?) *TheMarker*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.themarker-com.czproxy.haifa.ac.il/dynamo/2022-11->

## Security Ties

Another component of recent ties between Israel and Japan involves security. For decades, Japan shunned any sort of military ties with Israel, either the export or import of weaponry, let alone any joint military training or operational cooperation. Although Japan faces the serious threat of a ballistic missile attack by North Korea, it has shown no interest in acquiring Israel's advanced air-defence systems or in collaborating with Israel on any of its weapons development programmes.<sup>10</sup> This disinterest may have been due in part to real or anticipated pressure from Washington to stick to American weapons systems.

“Japan’s disinterest in any sort of military ties with Israel may have been due in part to real or anticipated pressure from Washington to stick to American weapons systems. ... [But] in recent years, Japan has budged slightly from its reluctance to purchase Israel’s military and security technology.”

Whatever the reason, in recent years, Japan has budged slightly from its reluctance to purchase Israel's military and security technology. This is notable in non-lethal domains such as cybersecurity, a domain where Japan believes Israel's advanced technologies could contribute to

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[22/ty-article/.premium/00000184-9f36-da0b-a985-ff7ffb240000](https://ty-article/.premium/00000184-9f36-da0b-a985-ff7ffb240000). As of 2022, Israel has signed economic partnership agreements with 47 states; among them only two are in Asia: South Korea (2021) and the United Arab Emirates (2022).

<sup>10</sup> That said, Japan in the past did purchase some Israeli-made electronic components that could be used in weapon systems. See Udi Etzion, “Hataa’siyot habithoniyot rotsot lihiyot gdolot beYapan” (The Defense Industries Wish to Become Big in Japan), *Calcalist*, 26 November 2019, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3774514,00.html>.



enhanced security. In May 2014, the two governments agreed to establish a dialogue on cybersecurity, and, half a year later, the first discussions were held.<sup>11</sup> Three years later, the two countries signed a cybersecurity cooperation agreement, and in October 2018 they held their first politico-military dialogue. In September 2019, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen their defence cooperation. By 2021 Japanese companies had made no less than 106 deals with Israeli cybersecurity companies, including the acquisition of some and investment in others.

### **People-to-People Ties**

Travel, the most salient aspect of people-to-people ties, had steadily increased between the two countries during the 2010s and until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020.<sup>12</sup> Starting with about 20,000 Japanese and Israeli visitors in 2011, the number of visitors travelling between the two countries more than tripled to 66,000 visitors in 2019. The lack of direct flights connecting the two countries has been a major impediment to the growth of travel between the two countries but this may change in the near future if the Israeli national carrier goes ahead with its plan to start direct flights to Japan, which had stalled following the onset of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the constant warnings against travelling to Israel by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs are probably a more compelling factor in the relative paucity of Japanese visitors to Israel. Although the size of the Japanese population is more than 10 times that of the Israeli population on a per capita basis,

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<sup>11</sup> Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-Israel Relations: First Dialogue on Cyber issues between Japan and Israel”, 18 November 2014, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/me\\_a/me1/il/page22e\\_000617.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/me_a/me1/il/page22e_000617.html).

<sup>12</sup> By the summer 2022, some 30 months after the outbreak of the pandemic, bilateral tourism had still not resumed.

<sup>13</sup> The Israeli flag carrier El Al intended to launch direct flights to Japan in March 2020 but due to the pandemic the launch was postponed. Starting in March 2023, and due in part to the recent Saudi decision to open its airspace to all aircraft flying to and from Israel, El Al will renew its plan for direct flights. See Zachy Hennessey, “Israel’s El Al to Offer Direct Flights to Tokyo and Melbourne”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/all-news/article-713214>.

the number of Israeli visitors to Japan was more than 20 times greater than the number of Japanese visitors to Israel. Moreover, since nearly 90 per cent of Israeli visitors to Japan were (non-business) tourists, compared with only 50 per cent among Japanese visitors, the gap in the number of tourists is even greater.<sup>14</sup>

## Factors Behind the Change

The main reason behind the upswing in Israeli-Japanese relations is the changing position of Israel in the Middle East. Since the outbreak in 2011 of widespread protests and uprisings known as the “Arab Spring”, the Middle East has witnessed major fissures. These have led to a further weakening of some of the countries in the region that were most staunchly opposed to Israel, which, in turn, has diminished their support for the Palestinian cause. The most notable of these countries is Syria, which has suffered a devastating civil war since 2011. A sworn enemy of Israel in the past, Syria was divided territorially, millions of its citizens became refugees and the central government lost a great deal of its military might.<sup>15</sup> Iraq, for its part, has not recovered fully from the conflict that followed the invasion by the US-led coalition in 2003. Following a long and eventually successful struggle against the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (popularly known as ISIS) that rose in the country, Iraq has experienced ongoing civil unrest. Likewise, Libya has experienced a revolution during which Muammar Gaddafi, its long-time leader and one of Israel’s most hostile opponents, was killed in 2011.

Japan has followed closely the ensuing decline in Arab disunity and has been concerned with the civil deterioration in the region, especially as some of its repercussions touched it directly. In 2015, for

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<sup>14</sup> An internal report of the Embassy of Israel, Tokyo, whose contents the author had access to through official sources.

<sup>15</sup> For the Japanese reaction to the Syrian Crisis, see Srabani Roy Choudhury, “Japan and the Middle East: An Overview”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5, no. 3 (2018): 191–2.

example, ISIS militants executed two Japanese hostages in Syria, in an act that received wide public attention in Japan. The execution, which was carried out despite the Japanese government's reported willingness to pay a huge ransom for the hostages' release, shocked the public and forged an essential consensus in the country on the need to fight Islamist terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

**“Against the backdrop of growing Arab disunity and weakness, and partly because of it, Israel has turned into a regional bastion of stability and military might.”**

Against this backdrop of growing Arab disunity and weakness, and partly because of it, Israel has turned into a regional bastion of stability and military might. Moreover, over the past three decades, Israel has witnessed considerable demographic growth and impressive economic expansion. Its high-tech sector has burgeoned and its military capabilities have grown in size and sophistication, outperforming potential rivals. Steady American support, especially during the tenure of President Donald Trump (2017–2021), made its position even stronger. In 2020, Israel was able to improve its ties with several Arab countries – Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan and Morocco – and consequently six members of the Arab League now recognise it. Even Saudi Arabia, the region's largest oil producer and a leading Arab state, has recently recognised Israel as a “potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together” and allowed Israeli airlines to fly through its air space.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Gambrell and Mari Yamaguchi, “Japan Weighs Ransom in Islamic State Threat to Kill Hostages”, Associated Press, 20 January 2015P; BBC, “Japan Outraged at IS 'Beheading' of Hostage Kenji Goto”, BBC, 1 February 2015.

<sup>17</sup> France24, “Do Signs Point to an Israel-Saudi Normalisation Deal?” France24, 26 June 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220626-do-signs-point-to-an-israel-saudi-normalisation-deal>.

Nevertheless, the Arab position towards Israel is not the only local factor determining Japanese policy towards the Middle East. Iran, which holds the world's second largest natural gas reserves and the fourth largest proven crude oil reserves, has been far more crucial for the Japanese economy than Israel. Until 2008, when the value of Japanese imports from Iran was over US\$17 billion, consisting largely of crude oil, and even as late as in 2011, when total oil imports from Iran exceeded US\$12 billion, relations with Israel could risk this important source of energy.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, however, Washington has forced Tokyo to bow to the nuclear-related international sanctions against Iran.<sup>19</sup> As a result, by 2015, overall Japanese imports from Iran amounted to little more than US\$3 billion and total bilateral trade was about US\$3.6 billion. A year later, Japanese imports of crude oil from Iran declined even further, alongside a similar decline in the total value of imports of Middle Eastern oil to 47.8 and 39.5 per cent of its levels in 2011 and 2013, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

**“The final factor in Japan’s policy [towards Israel] is the stronger position that China has gained in the Middle East over the past decade.”**

The final factor in Japan’s policy is the stronger position that China has gained in the Middle East over the past decade. Tokyo is particularly wary about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Beijing’s most important geopolitical project in Asia and beyond. Although the

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<sup>18</sup> Mari Nukii, “Japan-Iran Relations since the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5, no. 3 (2018): 221 (Table 1).

<sup>19</sup> For Japan’s wavering under American pressure on the Iranian nuclear issue and investments in oil infrastructure, see Yukiko Miyagi, “Japan’s Middle East Policy”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 12, no. 2 (2012): 306–8; Choudhury, “Japan and the Middle East”, 190–1.

<sup>20</sup> For Japan’s declining crude oil import from Iran, alongside other Middle East oil producers, during 2011–2016, see Choudhury, “Japan and the Middle East”, 193 (Table 1).

Japanese opposition to the initiative has relaxed considerably in recent years, Japan still regards the BRI, in Yoram Evron's words, "as a threat to its decades-long effort to spread its influence over Asia through infrastructure development projects across the continent."<sup>21</sup> The Sino-Japanese rivalry has turned into intense competition in a few Middle Eastern countries, as can be seen in Japanese investments in Chabahar. This Iranian port is located only 72 kilometres from the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, which was built by China as part of the BRI.<sup>22</sup> In Israel, by contrast, Japan has not endeavoured to compete with China's large investments in infrastructure (ports, roads, etc.), but its recent government-induced investments in Israel's high-tech companies and startups seem, in part, to be an attempt to keep its grip in Israel.

## Preliminary Conclusions

On the whole, it is the changing geopolitical situation in East Asia and the Middle East that is at the root of the shift in Japan's policy towards Israel during the 2010s. Under Abe's long premiership, Japan implemented a more proactive foreign policy and forged new alliances.<sup>23</sup> Warming relations with Israel were essentially a component of this new policy. The outcomes of this policy – which is driven by Abe's vision of making Japan a great power (again), in addition to concerns about a rising Chinese threat and weakening American presence in Asia – are still debatable. There is little doubt, however, that even though Abe was unable to accomplish his plan of revising Japan's pacifist constitution,

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<sup>21</sup> Yoram Evron, "Implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Japan's Involvement in the Middle East", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5, no. 3 (2018): 200, 207; Yoram Evron, "China–Japan Interaction in the Middle East: A Battleground of Japan's Remilitarization", *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 188–204. For the Japanese view of China and the strategy to contain it during the 2010s, see Michael J. Green, 2022. *Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Nukii. "Japan-Iran Relations", 223–5.

<sup>23</sup> See Andrew Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First-Century* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

Japan has become slightly more independent diplomatically in recent years.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that Abe and his immediate successors wished to pursue a radical change in Japan's Middle East policy and its policy towards Israel in particular. To start with, they do not have a compelling reason to do so. Whereas the relationship with Israel is no longer a major liability, it is still far from an evident asset as Israel does not hold any trump card that Japan covets in particular. Secondly, Japan under Abe and his successors has remained under the US security umbrella. Indeed, whether it has remained a "reluctant" realist state actor, as some argue, or is resentfully supporting the existing US-led international security order, Japan has not changed dramatically its fundamental conceptions of world affairs. Crucially, it is still unwilling, perhaps also unable, to make a truly radical move towards an independent foreign and security policy.<sup>25</sup> ◆

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<sup>24</sup> For this revision, see Jeremy A. Yellen, "Shinzo Abe's Constitutional Ambitions", *The Diplomat*, 12 June 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/shinzo-abes-constitutional-ambitions/>

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Giulio Pugliese and Alessio Patalano, "Diplomatic and Security Practice under Abe Shinzo: The Case for Realpolitik Japan", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 6 (2020): 615–32.

# Two Years after the Abraham Accords

## The State of Middle East–Asia Relations

Gedaliah Afterman and Theresa Hoffmann\*

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The ground-breaking Abraham Accords have created new opportunities for Israel and Asia to overcome traditional obstacles and enabled smaller countries to increase their manoeuvre space amid growing superpower competition. While some, like India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore have taken the opportunity to deepen already existing ties with Israel, others, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, remain hesitant. The still untapped potential of a normalisation agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, seen as a gatekeeper to Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, holds the potential to reshape both Asia and the Middle East.

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Concerns over the United States' ability and appetite to uphold its security commitments in the Middle East, growing superpower competition and a rapidly changing regional dynamic have pushed countries in the region and beyond to try to find regional solutions to regional problems. While President Biden has reassured allies

that the United States “will not walk away” from the Middle East,<sup>1</sup> a perceived US disengagement has resulted in a severe confidence crisis, particularly among US allies in the region. This credibility problem, influenced by US failures in Iraq, its rushed drawback from Afghanistan, and most recently its absence from the normalisation agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, has pushed countries to seek to diversify their partnerships. While long-term security and economic commitments are becoming more complicated, the future will be marked by middle countries’ need to diversify their partnerships and become more flexible to fill this looming power vacuum.

“The Abraham Accords ... were a direct reaction to the growing sense of regional insecurity and have ushered in a new reality in the Middle East.”

The Abraham Accords – the series of normalisation agreements signed with Israel by the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – were a direct reaction to the growing sense of regional insecurity and have initiated a paradigm shift, ushering in a new reality in the Middle East. Realising the strategic importance of working closely with Israel in the face of regional uncertainty, some regimes have dropped their demand for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a precondition for establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. Nevertheless, public opinion pressures for progress on the Palestinian issue remain. Those pressures also play a part in deterring others, such as Saudi Arabia, and have created challenges in reaching full normalisation with Israel. The Abraham Accords have nevertheless allowed Israel to reinvent itself –

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<sup>1</sup> “Remarks by President Biden at the GCC+3 Summit Meeting”, White House Briefing, 16 July 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/16/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-gcc-3-summit-meeting/>



from an unwelcome outlier to a sought-after regional player, especially in the Gulf.

While Israel's burgeoning relations with its neighbours are creating more opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa region, the Abraham Accords have also opened up windows of opportunity beyond their initial scope. New power brokers, such as the UAE, and perceived lower risks of an Arab boycott have prompted countries in Asia, particularly India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, to strengthen relations with Israel.

“While Israel’s burgeoning relations with its neighbours are creating more opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa region, the Abraham Accords have also opened up windows of opportunity beyond their initial scope.”

The previous Netanyahu governments (from 2009 to 2021) initiated and drove forward relations with a number of key Asian countries, including commencing free trade negotiations with China, India, Vietnam and South Korea, and increased defence ties with several others. A free trade agreement with South Korea has since been signed, while another with Vietnam is expected to be signed by the end of 2023.<sup>2</sup> But it remains to be seen to what extent these efforts will persist under the new Israeli government, led again by Prime Minister Netanyahu, as domestic tensions are forcing the government to, at least for the time

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<sup>2</sup> Reuters, “Israel and South Korea to sign free trade pact”, 9 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-south-korea-sign-free-trade-pact-2021-05-09/>; Reuters, “Vietnam says to sign free trade pact with Israel this year”, 3 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/vietnam-says-sign-free-trade-pact-with-israel-this-year-2023-04-03/>

being, look inward. In the long term, however, a closer look east towards Asia will be essential for Israel and holds enormous potential.

Israeli companies are already tapping into Asian markets and sources of investment. The most recent success is a US\$40 million investment by Japanese banking giant MUFG Bank in the Israeli fintech company Liquidity Group.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, increased strategic and more systematic cooperation and cross-regional partnerships will be essential to substantially strengthen such engagement.

## Minilateralism as a Way Forward

The intensifying competition between the United States and China is fundamentally changing global dynamics, leaving smaller powers caught in the middle and exposed to growing pressure. While these countries lack the power of China and the United States, they possess enough influence to shape international events. As a reaction, they have developed new coping strategies to avoid being forced to choose sides and to protect their interests.

One of these strategies can be seen in the Middle East and beyond: minilateralism. This term refers to flexible, interest-based cooperation among a small group of countries on a specific topic or goal outside of traditional multilateral institutions. While traditional multilateral institutions like the United Nations aim to establish global norms, they are often characterised by slow decision-making processes. Minilateralism enables faster decision-making and allows countries to navigate the complex geopolitical environment despite strategic differences among its members.

Minilateral cooperation has become more attractive as diplomatic relations today tend to be more short-term, interest-driven or goal-based rather than long-term and “open”. Moreover, due to great

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<sup>3</sup> Golan Hazani. “Liquidity Group reaches unicorn status with new \$40 million investment from Japan’s MUFG”, Calcalist, 20 February 2023, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/rjhmtaeco>

power rivalry, institutions such as the United Nations have increasingly been divided into competing camps and have not been effective in coordinating between the superpowers.<sup>4</sup> Smaller, more ad-hoc coalitions can be more target-focused and can yield faster results, as seen in the example of the I2U2, an economic partnership established between the United States, India, Israel and the UAE in October 2021. Lastly, effective minilateral partnerships tend to be rooted in economic pragmatism rather than political or security concerns; this limits the potential for ideological constraints and allows for pooling resources and achieving overall growth.

This new spirit of the times appears to be filling some of the gaps left by multilateral organisations and has increased manoeuvre space for smaller countries within diplomatic frameworks. For Israel, the Abraham Accords have opened the door to a number of new potential minilateral partnerships that extend beyond its immediate neighbourhood and especially to Asia.

## New Opportunities between Israel and Asia

A promising development in the geopolitical realignment between the Middle East and Asia is the establishment of the aforesaid **I2U2**, described as a “long-term strategic partnership”.<sup>5</sup> As the first minilateral grouping to build on the Abraham Accords (followed later by the Negev Forum), the I2U2 symbolises a shift in the recognition and political acceptance of Israel and a convergence of interests in a changing Middle East.

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<sup>4</sup> “The UN Turns Seventy-Five. Here’s How to Make it Relevant Again”, Council of Councils, 14 September 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/un-turns-seventy-five-heres-how-make-it-relevant-again>

<sup>5</sup> “Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)”, White House Briefing, 14 July 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-india-israel-united-arab-emirates-and-the-united-states-i2u2/>

The agenda of the I2U2 is characterised by a flexible pragmatism to expand economic cooperation without a security overtone, at least to date, or interference through geopolitical differences. This distinguishes it from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, involving Australia, Japan, India and the United States, to which the I2U2 is often misleadingly compared. Unlike the Quad, the I2U2 has outlined its focus beyond the traditional area of security cooperation, as stated in the joint statement issued by its members: “This unique grouping of countries aims to harness the vibrancy of our societies and entrepreneurial spirit to tackle some of the greatest challenges confronting our world, with a particular focus on joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security.”<sup>6</sup> The I2U2 members have launched a number of joint projects in the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to develop integrated food parks and enhance the UAE’s food security.<sup>7</sup>

“The I2U2 symbolises a shift in the recognition and political acceptance of Israel and a convergence of interests in a changing Middle East.”

The inclusion of **India** into the grouping is a result of its growing importance to the Middle East and especially the Gulf region. While India traditionally has been part of the non-aligned movement, bilateral relations between Israel and India have significantly improved since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014. The robust Israel-India relationship has gained from

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<sup>6</sup> “Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)”, White House Briefing, 14 July 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-india-israel-united-arab-emirates-and-the-united-states-i2u2/>

<sup>7</sup> “Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)”.

the I2U2 India has also moved increasingly closer to the United States as a result of growing tension between India and China. Both dynamics show that India under Modi is taking a more pragmatic approach in its foreign relations.

“The agenda of the I2U2 is characterised by a flexible pragmatism to expand economic cooperation without a security overtone ... or interference through geopolitical differences.”

While the United States has been the I2U2’s “chief unifier”, the three middle powers in the group can take the lead on cooperation. Indeed, several trilateral initiatives are already under way.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of 2022, the UAE signed separate comprehensive economic partnership agreements (CEPA) with Israel and India, potentially paving the way towards a trilateral free trade agreement. The agreement with Israel, taking effect in April 2023, will reduce or remove 96% of tariffs in sectors such as agriculture and pharmaceuticals, which cover 99% of all trade between Israel and the UAE.<sup>9</sup>

A great opportunity would be the expansion of the I2U2 to add other partners, such as **Japan**, which already has shown its appetite for minilateralism by joining the Quad in 2007. Japan has intensified its military and defence cooperation with the United States and signed defence agreements with Australia and the United Kingdom, developments that have increased the prospect of Japan eventually

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<sup>8</sup> “India and Israel can be pivots in reglobalising Asia”, Observer Research Foundation, 28 March 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-and-israel-can-be-pivots-in-reglobalising-asia/>

<sup>9</sup> “UAE-Israel Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) enters into force”, PwC, 4 April 2023. <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/services/tax/me-tax-legal-news/2023/uae-israel-cepa.html>

joining AUKUS, the trilateral security pact involving Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>10</sup> The Abraham Accords have decreased Japan's concerns about a potential Arab boycott of Asian countries trading with Israel and have opened a new chapter in the Israeli-Japanese relationship, especially in the defence sector.<sup>11</sup> Reflecting Japan's evolving national security policy, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for defence cooperation in 2022.

**“While the United States has been the I2U2’s ‘chief unifier’, the three middle powers in the group can take the lead on cooperation.”**

Japanese investment in Israel reached an unprecedented high of US\$2.9 billion in 2021, a 190% increase compared to 2020, and has accounted for 15% of all foreign investment in Israel.<sup>12</sup> While this increase has since slowed down, Japanese investment in Israel in 2022 still accounted for 12.8% of all foreign investment and has been focused on industries such as cleantech, agritech and foodtech.<sup>13</sup> Negotiations for the signing of a free trade agreement were launched between the two countries in late 2022. Once signed, a free trade agreement is expected to give bilateral trade an additional boost.<sup>14</sup> As Japan seeks to reposition

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<sup>10</sup> Harley Dennett. “Japan welcome into expanded AUKUS ‘when ready’: Richard Marles”, *The Canberra Times*, 9 December 2022,

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8014132/marles-invites-aucus-role-for-japan/>

<sup>11</sup> “DM Gantz signs Defense Cooperation Memorandum with Japan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel, 30 August 2022, <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/dm-gantz-signs-defense-cooperation-memorandum-with-japan-30-aug-2022>

<sup>12</sup> Meir Orbach, “Japanese investments in Israeli startups reach record \$2.9 billion in 2021”, *Calcalist*, 9 January 2022, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0,7340,L-3926790,00.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Meir Orbach, “Japanese investments in Israel fall by almost 50% in 2022”, *Calcalist*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/bkidulfpi>

<sup>14</sup> Lahov Harkov, “Israel, Japan make strides towards free trade agreement”, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 November 2022,

itself strategically, including in the Middle East, minilateral cooperation, including through the I2U2, could be a natural fit.<sup>15</sup>

Recent developments in Europe, and the Indo-Pacific, have highlighted the importance of the Middle East for Japan even more. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Tokyo has joined US-led economic sanctions against Russia, including curtailing its much-needed oil and gas purchases. By giving up a decade-long effort by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to establish closer ties with Russia, Japan has become increasingly dependent on substantial oil and gas imports from the Middle East.<sup>16</sup> In 2022, Japan imported 90% of its crude oil from the Middle East,<sup>17</sup> and in December 2022 alone signed 15 new strategic investment agreements with Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup>

“Recent developments in Europe, and the Indo-Pacific, have highlighted the importance of the Middle East for Japan even more.”

The new Japanese government under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is reassessing Japan's regional and global positions. Increased

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<https://www.jpost.com/international/article-723057>

<sup>15</sup> Michael Tanchum. “The India-Middle East Food Corridor: How the UAE, Israel, and India Are Forging a New Inter-regional Supply Chain”, Middle East Institute, 27 July 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-middle-east-food-corridor-how-uae-israel-and-india-are-forging-new-inter>

<sup>16</sup> “Resolved: Japan should maintain investments in Russian oil and gas projects”, CSIS, 15 June 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resolved-japan-should-maintain-investments-russian-oil-and-gas-projects>

<sup>17</sup> “Japan's dependency on Middle East crude reaches 94.5% in August – METI”, Reuters, 30 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/japans-dependency-middle-east-crude-reaches-945-august-meti-2022-09-30/>

<sup>18</sup> “Agreement between Japan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the Promotion and Protection of Investment”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000004311.pdf>

cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, with the active inclusion of Israel, could strengthen Japan's position in the region and afford it more space to manoeuvre in the region as China's influence continues to grow. Japan could also seek to use its strong relations with Middle East and Gulf countries to bring more countries, such as Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, to the table, including them in mutually beneficial cross-regional cooperation.

Another Asian democracy, already a step ahead of its regional neighbour Japan in formalising a free trade agreement with Israel, is **South Korea**. The new free trade deal between South Korea and Israel, having taken effect in December 2022, lowered prices for Korean products like cars, toys, video game consoles, and even soy sauce. The deal is expected to benefit Israel's economy by US\$141 million annually.<sup>19</sup> This first free trade deal with an Asian country could lay the groundwork for deals that Israel is currently negotiating with China, Vietnam and Japan.

Israel's relations with South Korea have long been focused on military security, with Israel exporting air defence systems, radar, missiles and other military equipment to South Korea since the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup> Preceding the free trade agreement, bilateral trade between South Korea and Israel increased 35% in 2021 to US\$3.5 billion.<sup>21</sup> As the Israeli ambassador in Seoul, Akiva Tor, explained, South Korea and Israel have enormous potential for cooperation, particularly in technology sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI) and cleantech, an umbrella term for goods or services aimed at environmental protection or reducing environmental degradation through energy efficiency technology and

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<sup>19</sup> "Israel-South Korea free trade deal to take effect Dec. 1", Reuters, 28 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/israel-south-korea-free-trade-deal-take-effect-dec-1-2022-09-28/>

<sup>20</sup> A. S. Ningthoujam, "Israel-South Korea Relations: The Military Dimension", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 4, no. 2 (2017): 168–192. [doi.org/10.1177/2347798917700767](https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798917700767)

<sup>21</sup> "Israel-South Korea free trade deal to take effect Dec. 1", Reuters, 28 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/israel-south-korea-free-trade-deal-take-effect-dec-1-2022-09-28/>



sustainable use of resources. Regarding AI, Korea is likely to incorporate Israeli mobility software into the new autonomous vehicles it is developing.<sup>22</sup>

“Successful trilateral cooperation could combine Israel’s entrepreneurial spirit with South Korea’s cutting-edge technologies, and investment resources and expertise from the UAE.”

South Korea also has extensive relations with the UAE, celebrated by a January 2023 agreement during a state visit by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to the UAE, which states that the UAE will invest a total of US\$30 billion in South Korea. These investments will focus on areas such as nuclear power, hydrogen, defence and solar energy industries.<sup>23</sup> These dynamics of business diplomacy are creating increased convergences of interests between South Korea and the UAE, and including Israel in the mix could be of great benefit to all. Successful trilateral cooperation could combine Israel’s entrepreneurial spirit with South Korea’s cutting-edge technologies, and investment resources and expertise from the Gulf state. A clear, goal-oriented multilateral alliance can also help tackle sustainability issues cross-regionally, transcending ideological rifts.

The changing global dynamics and, in particular, the Abraham Accords have allowed another important Asian actor to move closer to Israel: **Singapore**. Traditionally wary of its Muslim-majority neighbours, Singapore has downplayed its close cooperation with Israel throughout the years. While the two countries established relations in the 1960s, it

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<sup>22</sup> Sanjay Kumar, “Israel proposes new Western policy for Korea”, *The Korea Herald*, 5 December 2021, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211205000091>

<sup>23</sup> “UAE pledges to invest \$30 billion in South Korea, president’s office says”, Reuters, 15 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/uae-pledges-invest-30-billion-south-korea-yoons-office-2023-01-15/>

was the growing rapprochement between Israel and its Arab neighbours that helped to pave the way for Singapore to take a significant step towards more active engagement through its March 2022 decision to open an embassy in Tel Aviv.

As two middle powers punching above their diplomatic weight, Israel and Singapore have much they can cooperate on, from technology to navigating the intensifying superpower competition. Singapore has displayed considerable diplomatic skill in manoeuvring US-China superpower competition and has successfully managed to avoid the numerous potential traps of its complex regional environment. The strategic experience of Singapore can be highly beneficial for countries in the Middle East, especially Israel. Certainly, Israel's closest strategic ally remains the United States, but relations with China are growing. The tensions between the two big powers have resulted in multiple escalations, ultimately leading to Israel's announcement that any major deal with China would be communicated with the United States and if necessary re-examined.<sup>24</sup> Such tensions require a balancing act that is not easy to manage.

**“Given its solid standing, Singapore holds great potential to promote cross-regional partnerships with the Middle East, especially with Israel and the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.”**

Singapore's solid regional partnerships as an active member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and of several regional and cross-regional free trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive

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<sup>24</sup> “Israel will keep US in the loop on major economic deals with China – report”, *Times of Israel*, 3 January 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-will-keep-us-in-the-loop-on-major-economic-deals-with-china-report/>

and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), have woven it tightly into its region's economic fabric. Given its solid standing, Singapore holds great potential to promote cross-regional partnerships with the Middle East, especially with Israel and the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.

One opportunity for Singapore to engage would be a push towards expanding the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the RCEP to the Middle East. Including Israel and the UAE could be a great opportunity for those involved. Cooperation on technology, sustainability and green tech can chart a promising way forward for Israel, its new Middle Eastern partners and Asian nations.

Taking this approach, Israel, India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and the UAE can truly carve a considerable amount of strategic autonomy, but this requires that they look beyond current structures and form new frameworks and groupings.

## Expanding the Abraham Accords to Asia

The Abraham Accords and the cross-regional dynamic they have enabled, like the establishment of the I2U2, chart a promising path ahead, but much of the accords' potential remains untapped. Since their signing, one of the long-standing and unmet expectations of the Abraham Accords has been the establishment of diplomatic ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recently described Israel as a potential ally rather than an enemy,<sup>25</sup> but hesitancy remains in the leadership, deeply influenced by negative attitudes among the Saudi population towards official ties with Israel. Studies show that only 30% of Saudis support a commercial exchange with Israel.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "Saudi Arabia says Israel is 'potential ally'", *Middle East Monitor*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220304-saudi-arabia-says-israel-is-potential-ally/>

<sup>26</sup> Shmuel Trigano, "The Abraham Accords: Contrasting Reflections", Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, March 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29695>.

Although countries like Japan, South Korea and Singapore are already increasing their cooperation with Israel, others, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, remain hesitant to establish relations with the Jewish state. A normalisation agreement with Saudi Arabia would mark a fundamental step, decrease the concern of an Arab boycott for Asian countries, and open several doors for new cross-regional cooperation.

“Although countries like Japan, South Korea and Singapore are already increasing their cooperation with Israel, others, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, remain hesitant to establish relations with the Jewish state.”

While there have been signs in the past that Jakarta was willing to move towards developing ties with Israel, including exchanging semi-public visits by officials, Indonesia’s majority Muslim population and, in particular, a relatively small number of radical Islamist groups are holding back the establishment of diplomatic relations. More low-key opportunities for cooperation, such as joint projects in the agricultural sector, could pave the way towards fruitful economic cooperation, but the political climate in Indonesia would need to allow for such progress.

A normalisation agreement with Saudi Arabia could, for example, open the door for Israel to establish closer ties with Indonesia, but this should not be seen as the only avenue. The UAE is one of Indonesia’s closest partners in the Middle East; significant investments by the Emiratis in Indonesia’s energy sector, healthcare and port development have created strong ties. Bilateral ties have even strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Indonesia benefited greatly from UAE assistance in providing oxygen cylinders and

thousands of vaccine doses.<sup>27</sup> Israel, ranking first in Asia in the 2022 World Index of Healthcare Innovation, could use its cutting-edge health-tech solutions to make a significant impact on the Indonesian healthcare system.<sup>28</sup> An Emirati push towards trilateral collaboration with Israel and Indonesia on these issues could enable new partnerships and allow for a reassessment by the Indonesian government of its relations with Israel.

Another breakthrough would be the normalisation of relations between Israel and Malaysia. However, the Muslim-majority country has openly rejected the Abraham Accords and remains a strong and vocal opponent of Israel. Progress on this front may only be possible at a later stage, particularly once official diplomatic ties are established with Saudi Arabia.

## Moving Forward

While traditional diplomatic relations in the Middle East and beyond have focused strongly on a shared ideology and strategic concerns, new multilateral forms of cooperation could build bridges to thus far untapped territories. Israel's new partners in the Gulf, such as the UAE and, hopefully, in the future, Saudi Arabia, could enable interest- and issue-based partnerships that seemed unrealistic and out of reach until recently.

Israel, India and the UAE have already started to set a new path forward. Other countries can and should now follow to find new ways and strategies in an ever-more multi-networked world. Countries also must adapt to a changing Middle East and move away from the traditional diplomatic principle of prioritising their position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthering regional and cross-regional, rather

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<sup>27</sup> “The UAE government sent oxygen and vaccines in support of the fight against COVID-19 in Indonesia”, Embassy of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi, 16 July 2022, <https://kemlu.go.id/abudhabi/en/news/14986/the-uae-government-sent-oxygen-and-vaccines-in-support-of-the-fight-against-covid-19-in-indonesia>

<sup>28</sup> Gregg Girvan and Avik Roy, “Israel: #6 in the 2022 World Index of Healthcare Innovation”, FREOPP.org, 7 March 2023, <https://freopp.org/israel-6-in-the-2022-world-index-of-healthcare-innovation-285aac221dc>

than bilateral, cooperation will increase mutual dependence and the cost of ideological stances. As such, it can benefit regional peace in the Middle East and contribute to a possible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the zero-sum game of US-China superpower competition, middle powers are becoming pivotal in reshaping both the Middle East and Asia. A new inclusive, more independent approach will enable those willing to adopt it to build new partnerships beyond traditional constraints. Those willing to walk these new ways are more likely to become resilient enough to manoeuvre the complex and rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. ◆

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# Expanding Israel-Azerbaijan Ties and Impact on Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

## The Case of the Karabakh War

Engin Koç\*

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Following Azerbaijan's defeat against Armenia in the first Karabakh war, it sought a new military ally against Armenia: Israel, which, for its part, was seeking to enhance relations with countries in the Caucasus region that could help neutralise the threat from Iran. Israel's military and technical support for Azerbaijan allowed the latter to achieve military balance with Armenia and emerge victorious in the second Karabakh war in 2020. This article discusses the growing relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel and the role it has played in exacerbating the longstanding competition between Iran and Azerbaijan.

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**A**lthough Israel had established diplomatic relations with most of the countries in the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet period, its political presence in the region was limited initially. However, with the perceived existential threat from Iran mounting, especially with Iran's nuclear programme, Israel has sought in recent years to enhance its relations with countries in the region that could serve to encircle Iran. Cultivating ties with Azerbaijan fits in with this goal.

The second war of September 2020 between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region presented a unique opportunity for Israel to keep Iran in check by supporting Azerbaijan. The main argument of this paper is that the second Karabakh war not only played a crucial role in developing Israel-Azerbaijan relations but has also seriously strained relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.

## Background

The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Following Czarist Russia's victory over Iran and the Ottoman empire in the South Caucasus, local Armenians began to settle in the area under the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchay (1828).<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, in 1921, Karabakh was made an autonomous region within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.

As Armenians in the Karabakh region sought to unite with Armenia, tensions and clashes began to rise between the Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia in the late 1980s. This ultimately led to the first Karabakh war as Armenians in Karabakh declared independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia's conventional army aided the Armenians. A truce brokered by Russia in 1994 left in Armenian hands Karabakh and seven other districts in Azerbaijan, making up about 16 per cent of Azerbaijan's total land area.<sup>2</sup> Although the fighting ended, the disputes remained unresolved. The conflict resulted in the deaths of over 30,000 individuals and the displacement of more than a million

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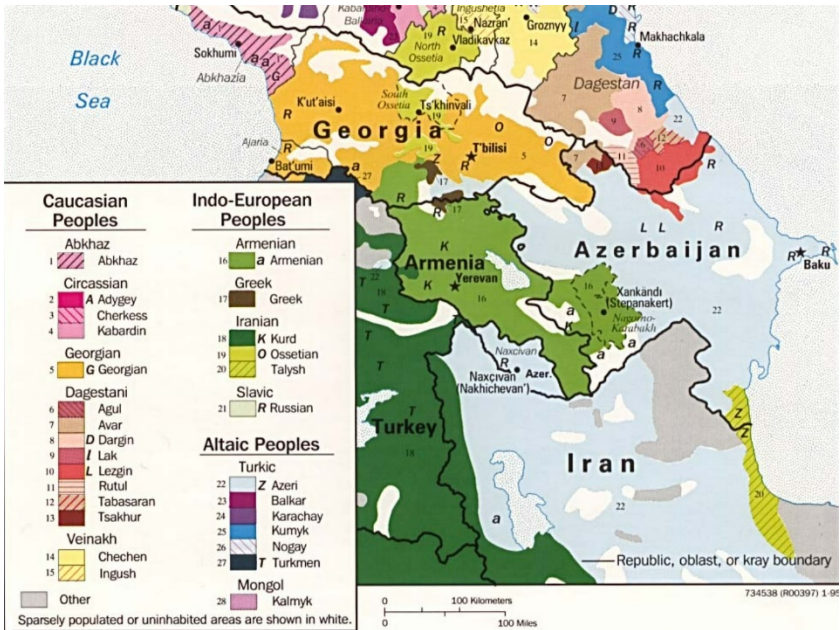
<sup>1</sup> Arshi Khan "Revisiting the Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia", *The Indian Journal of Politics* 54, no. 1–2, (2020): 2.

<sup>2</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter, "The Causes of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War" in *The Karabakh Conflict Between Armenia and Azerbaijan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp: 33-66; Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, Wartorn, Post-Soviet Republic* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).



people in Azerbaijan.<sup>3</sup> The socioeconomic rifts between the old and new elites arising from the *perestroika* reforms of the late Soviet era also continued to fester and add to existing tensions.

### Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan



Adapted from CIA map showing ethnolinguistic groups in the Caucasus region, 1995. Source: the Perry-Castañeda Library (PCL) Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin, <https://maps.ib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/ethnocaucasus.jpg>

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan’s relations with neighbouring Iran have not been free of tensions despite the two sharing strong historical ties.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Askerov, “The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: The Beginning of the Soviet End”, in *Post-Soviet Conflicts: The Thirty Years’ Crisis*, ed. Stefan Brooks and Lasha Tchantouridze, pp. 55–82 (Lexington Books, 2020), p. 56.

Although Iran and Azerbaijan have a shared sectarian identity based on their adherence to Shi'a Islam, Azerbaijan's more secular orientation is at odds with the Iranian regime's Islamic fervour. The two countries also have ethnic affinities and family links – there are more Azeris in Iran than there are in Azerbaijan. But Tehran sees Baku as a serious threat because of Azerbaijan's potential for influencing ethnonationalism among the Azeris who make up a third of its population. Indeed, Azerbaijan's declaration of independence in the dying days of the Soviet Union aroused concerns of this nature in Iran. Baku, for its part, is concerned about the influence that Tehran has sought to wield in Azerbaijan by surreptitiously backing Shi'a groups.

During the first Karabakh war, Iran indirectly aligned itself with Armenia and Russia.<sup>4</sup> As a neighbour of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran did try to mediate a resolution between the two in 1992 and again in 2000, but its efforts were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Abulfaz Elchibey, who became president of Azerbaijan in 1993, began to make claims about Iran that were irredentist and nationalist. The president's assertive foreign policy stance and pan-Turkic policies, Iran's own explicitly geopolitical aspirations, the diverse alliances of the two countries as well as disputes over the Caspian Sea contributed to the deterioration of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.<sup>5</sup>

## Expanding Israel-Azerbaijan Ties

Israel and Azerbaijan have maintained friendly relations and cooperation since Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991. Indeed, from the time of Azerbaijan's independence, the United States has encouraged the country to strengthen ties with Israel to form a regional alliance together with Turkey and Georgia to counteract the anti-US coalition of

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<sup>4</sup> Zaur Gasimov, "Active but Inefficient? Iran's Strategy Towards the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh", in *The Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for the Future*, ed. Turan Gafarlı and Michael Arnold, TRT Research Center, 2021, p. 210

<sup>5</sup> Nasib Nassibli, "Azerbaijan-Iranian Relations: Past and Present", *Journal of Azerbaijani Studies* (1999): 3–23.

Syria, Iran, Armenia and Russia. The Jewish community in Azerbaijan – mainly the so-called Mountain Jews, and the Georgian and Ashkenazi Jews – has a long history in the country and is also said to have played a significant role in strengthening ties between Israel and Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup>

“[Azerbaijan’s] assertive foreign policy stance and pan-Turkic policies, Iran’s own explicitly geopolitical aspirations, the diverse alliances of the two countries as well as disputes over the Caspian Sea contributed to the deterioration of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.”

Israel established diplomatic ties with Azerbaijan and Armenia in April 1992 and opened an embassy in Baku the following year.<sup>7</sup> However, Azerbaijan did not reciprocate owing to worries about losing Arab support at the United Nations for the Karabakh conflict.<sup>8</sup> Azerbaijan established an office for Azerbaijan Airlines in Tel Aviv<sup>9</sup> but it remained cognisant of the potentially detrimental reactions from Iran and the Muslim world regarding its relationship with Israel.

Notwithstanding Azerbaijan’s squeamishness about openly acknowledging its relations with Israel, it felt it needed an ally to redress what it saw as the power imbalance in the region. Support from Turkey, a staunchly pro-Azerbaijan player, was not considered strong enough in

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Lerner, “Jews of Quba, Azerbaijan”, *Minutario*, 28 August 2010, <https://www.minutario.com/the-jews-of-quba-azerbaijan-699>

<sup>7</sup> Michael B. Bishku, “Israel’s Foreign Policy toward the Karabakh Conflict”, in *Nagorno Karabakh Conflict*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael M. Gunter, pp. 366–381 (Routledge, 2022), p. 372.

<sup>8</sup> Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer, “Israel’s Role in the Second Armenian-Azerbaijan War”, in *The Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for the Future*, ed. Turan Gafarlı and Michael Arnold, TRT Research Center, 2021, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> Gallia M. Lindenstrauss, “Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, A Special Relationship”, *Strategic Assessment*, 17, no. 4 (2015): 69–79.

the 1990s to counterbalance Armenia, which was backed by Russia as well as Iran. Instead, Israel was seen as having the military and technological prowess to support Azerbaijan. Israel, for its part, was looking to exert pressure on Iran by building alliances with new non-Arab Muslim states in the region.

“Notwithstanding Azerbaijan’s squeamishness about openly acknowledging its relations with Israel, it felt it needed an ally to redress what it saw as the power imbalance in the region.”

Thus, Iran-Azerbaijan relations have been flourishing. There are two main pillars to the relationship: the geopolitical one, centring on both countries’ concerns about Iran, and the strategic angle centring on energy, military and technology cooperation as well as cooperation in intelligence and counterterrorism. The oil trade has been crucial in strengthening relations between the two countries – Azerbaijan supplied 40% of Israel’s oil consumption in 2012<sup>10</sup> – but national security interests have been even more critical. In the same year, the state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries sold Azerbaijan US\$1.6 billion worth of weapons, which represented 43% of Azerbaijan’s total military spending. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), there was a spurt in Azerbaijan’s arms purchases from Israel from 2015 onwards and, indeed, since in the last five years, Azerbaijan was Israel’s second largest arms customer after India. Israeli weaponry was used in the April 2016 Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to SIPRI, Israeli exports of military equipment to Azerbaijan, including high-tech Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and Harop Kamikaze drones, constituted 69% of Azerbaijan’s military equipment

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<sup>10</sup> Cnan Liphshiz, “Azerbaijan Fosters Close Ties with Israel despite Iran”, *The Times of Israel*, 18 September 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/azerbaijan-fosters-close-ties-with-israel-despite-iran/>

and played a significant role in the 2020 war in Karabakh.<sup>11</sup> Israeli military advisers also helped prepare Azerbaijani forces for the 2020 war.<sup>12</sup>

### “Israeli military advisers helped prepare Azerbaijani forces for the 2020 war over Karabakh.”

As far as naval assistance is concerned, Israel provided cutting-edge boats outfitted with guided missiles with a range of 25 km and superior navigation systems, as well as OPV-62 and Shaldag Mk. V ships. It also provided Gabriel V anti-ship missiles with a range of 200–400 km and high accuracy.<sup>13</sup> Israeli military and security cooperation were also important in building Azerbaijan’s domestic defence sector. The parties agreed to jointly produce Saar S72 corvettes to boost Azerbaijan’s naval deterrence capabilities. These corvettes will be outfitted with anti-aircraft missile systems, cruise missiles and AESA radar.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, an Israeli defence company, Aeronautics, set up a factory for producing military drones in Azerbaijan. The full extent and nature of Azerbaijan’s ties with Israel has not been publicly acknowledged but in a 2009 US diplomatic

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<sup>11</sup> Seth Frantzman, “Did Azerbaijan’s Use of Israeli Weapons Make the War Worse or Better?” *Jerusalem Post*,

18 March 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/did-azerbajians-use-of-israeli-weapons-make-the-war-worse-or-better-662442>; Fuad Shahbazov, “Tactical Reasons Behind Military Breakthrough in Karabakh Conflict”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 November 2020, <http://gpf-europe.com/context/publications/?id=69160>

<sup>12</sup> Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer, “Israel’s Role in the Second Armenian-Azerbaijan War”, in *The Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for the Future*, ed. Turan Gafarlı and Michael Arnold, TRT Research Center, 2021, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> Rusif Huseynov, “The Sky is the Limit: The Azerbaijan-Israel-Turkey Trip and the Greater Middle East”, *Turkey Scope Insight on Turkish Affairs* 6, no. 4 (July–August 2022), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Rusif Huseynov, “The Sky is the Limit: The Azerbaijan-Israel-Turkey Trip and the Greater Middle East”, *Turkey Scope Insight on Turkish Affairs* 6, no. 4 (July–August 2022), p. 3.

cable leaked by WikiLeaks, Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, was quoted as having said that the relationship was like an iceberg, with nine-tenths of it being "below the surface".<sup>15</sup>

Apart from incorporating Israeli UAVs into its defence system, Azerbaijan has also incorporated Turkish UAVs.<sup>16</sup> Since Azerbaijan's independence, Ankara and Baku have been vaunting their natural strategic partnership with the slogan "one nation, two states". It was through the mediation efforts of the president of Azerbaijan that Turkey and Israel declared the restoration of their diplomatic relations in August 2022 following the rift that arose over the Palestinian issue in 2010. Azerbaijan's geographical location may have been crucial to mending relations between Israel and Turkey.

## The Second Karabakh War

Domestic political developments in Armenia in 2018 allowed the emergence of Nikol Pashinyan as president. His subsequent rhetoric on the Karabakh conflict was one of the factors in the outbreak of the second Karabakh war in 2020. But, Armenia's inability to effectively organise its troops and community delivered victory to Azerbaijan. As mentioned earlier, support from Israel strengthened Azerbaijan's capability. Turkey's political and military rise by then and its involvement was also a significant factor in Azerbaijan's victory in the war.

Azerbaijan expected Iran's support in the second Karabakh war on religious and neighbourly grounds, but Tehran preferred a "wait and see" policy. Iran in fact favoured the pre-war status quo, which would have perpetuated Baku's dependence on Tehran to reach the province of Nakhichevan, an enclave separated from the Azerbaijani mainland by

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<sup>15</sup> The Economist, "Odd but Useful Allies", 1 January 2021,

<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2012/01/21/odd-but-useful-allies>

<sup>16</sup> Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer, "Israel's Role in the Second Armenian-Azerbaijan War", in *The Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for the Future*, ed. Turan Gafarlı and Michael Arnold, TRT Research Center, 2021, p. 190.

Armenian territory.<sup>17</sup> Iran's primary concern is that Azerbaijan's potential victory would directly impact its own Turkic-speaking population, threatening domestic security and national sovereignty in the long run.<sup>18</sup> These concerns have been exacerbated by Azerbaijan's growing partnership with Turkey and Israel and influenced Iran's stance on the Armenia-Azerbaijan issue.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, Iran chose to back Armenia covertly.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Iran has for some time been enhancing its ties with Armenia and Russia, to the detriment of Azerbaijan.

## The Aftermath of the War

Israel's support for Azerbaijan in the second Karabakh war not only damaged the Jewish nation's relations with Armenia but also drew strong condemnation from the Orthodox-Christian Armenian community in Israel, which has already been aggrieved by the Israeli parliament's failure to recognise what is widely known as the 1915 Armenian genocide. Israeli Armenians demonstrated on the streets against the government's stance during the crisis. An Israeli-born Armenian describes Israel's support for Azerbaijan thus: "The world has seen the footage: Israeli weapons have killed Armenian civilians. Now we know – Israel is responsible too."<sup>21</sup> Israeli Armenians demonstrated on the streets against the government's stance during the crisis.

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<sup>17</sup> Umut Basar, "Is Iran One of the Losers of the Karabakh War?", Anadolu Agency, 26 November 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-is-iran-one-of-the-losers-of-the-karabakh-war/2056842>

<sup>18</sup> Hülya Kınık and Sinem Çelik, "Turkey's Grand Strategy: National Independence, Regional Leadership and Global Status", Vol. 23, No. 4, *Insight Turkey* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 169–192.

<sup>19</sup> Mesiagha Mahammadi and Vasif Huseynov, "Iran's Policy Toward the Karabakh Conflict", in *Nagorno Karabakh Conflict*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael M. Gunter, p. 381–402 (Routledge, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Eetta Prince-Gibson, "For Armenians in Israel, a Sad Holiday and Identity Crisis Following Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, *Haaretz*, 24 January, 2021,

More significantly, Israel's support and cooperation with Azerbaijan during the war with Armenia was well received by many ethnic Azeris in Iran. This added to the Iranian government's concerns.<sup>22</sup> Iran has been concerned about growing Israeli-Azerbaijani security ties and the frequent visits of high-ranking Israeli military officials to Azerbaijan since the 2020 war.

**“Teheran is especially concerned over the possibility of Israeli intelligence using Azerbaijani territory to spy on Iran and potentially destabilise the Islamic government.”**

It is important to note that Israel has not publicly recognised any direct involvement in the battle, and Azerbaijan has also publicly denied receiving military assistance from any nation during the conflict. Azerbaijan insists that it maintains a neutral stance between Israel and Iran. But Iranians are questioning why Azerbaijan still needs to purchase Israeli weapons and maintain a military relationship with Israel after its victory against Armenia.<sup>23</sup> Tehran is especially concerned over the possibility of Israeli intelligence using Azerbaijani territory to spy on Iran and potentially destabilise the Islamic government.

Iran is also worried about Azerbaijan's potential development of the Zangezur overland transport corridor, which would connect eastern Azerbaijan to the aforementioned enclave of Nakhichevan. The idea of a

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<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-01-24/ty-article/.premium/im-in-mourning-for-one-of-my-countries-im-furious-with-the-other/0000017f-e31e-d568-ad7f-f37f7bc90000>

<sup>22</sup> Michael B. Bishku, “Israel and Armenia: So Near Experientially, But So Far Away Geopolitically”, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 20–43.

<sup>23</sup> Benyamin Poghosyan, “Azerbaijan Becomes a New Battlefield for Iran-Israel Rivalry”, *Armenian Weekly*, 16 November 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/11/16/azerbaijan-becomes-a-new-battlefield-for-iran-israel-rivalry/>



transport corridor was raised as part of the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia although Armenia objects to the Zangezur corridor proposal. The corridor would have serious geopolitical impacts on Iran and Armenia. It would not only isolate Iran from Armenia and bring Azerbaijan closer to Turkey and Western influences, but it would also effectively cut off Syunik in southern Armenia from the rest of the country, resulting in a significant loss of territory. Iran fears the corridor would also allow for the presence of Israel and NATO near Iran's borders. However, it could also eventually connect Azerbaijan to the European Union, which would benefit Azerbaijan economically.<sup>24</sup>

**“Iran fears the proposed Zangezur overland transport corridor [connecting eastern Azerbaijan to an enclave separated from the Azerbaijani mainland by Armenian territory] would allow for the presence of Israel and NATO near Iran’s borders.”**

Tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan have been increasing since the second Karabakh war and intensified in late 2021 after Azerbaijan began imposing levies and checking Iranian trucks heading for Armenia through territory that was newly wrested back from Armenia during the second Karabakh war.<sup>25</sup> In apparent response, the Iranian army conducted military drills close to the border of Azerbaijan in October 2021. The drills involved tanks, helicopters, artillery and

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<sup>24</sup> Namig Abbasov and Emil A. Souleimanov, “Azerbaijan, Israel and Iran: An Unlikely Triangle Shaping the Northern Middle East”, *Middle East Policy* 29 (2022: 139–153).

<sup>25</sup> Heydar Isayev and Ani Mejlumyan, “Azerbaijan starts charging Iranian trucks supplying Armenia”, Eurasianet, 14 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-starts-charging-iranian-trucks-supplying-armenia>

soldiers called “Conquers of Khaybar”, in reference to the war between Muslims and Jews during the Prophet Muhammad’s time.<sup>26</sup>

**“Tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan have been increasing since the second Karabakh war and intensified in late 2021.”**

In this context, the foreign minister of Iran, Hossein Amirabdollahian, asserted, “We do not allow the presence and operation of the Zionist regime, or Israel, next to our borders, and we will take any appropriate measures in this regard.” Although he recognised that Iran’s relationship with Azerbaijan was “vital”, he maintained that Iran had the “right” to carry out military drills.<sup>27</sup> A month later, a hard-line Iranian parliamentarian, Mahmoud Ahmadi-Bighash, declared during a visit to Armenia that any change of borders in the South Caucasus was a “red line” for Iran.<sup>28</sup>

Tensions mounted further when Iran opened a consulate in the Azeri city of Kapan in Armenia in November 2022.<sup>29</sup> In response, Azerbaijan’s parliament announced in late November 2022 that it would

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<sup>26</sup> “Army to Test Four New Military Equipment in the Northwest Iran” *Tehran Times*, 1 October 2021 <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/465639/Army-to-test-four-new-military-equipment-in-northwest-Iran>

<sup>27</sup> Riya Baibhawi, “Conquers of Kheibar: Iran Begins Military Drills on Border with Azerbaijan”, *Republic World*, 2 October 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/conquerors-of-kheibar-iran-begins-military-drills-on-border-with-azerbaijan.html>

<sup>28</sup> “Iran Reaffirms ‘Red Line’ on South Caucasus Borders”, Azatutyun, 22 December 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31621670.html>

<sup>29</sup> Farid Mirzali, “Azerbaijan to Open an Embassy in Israel: Why Now?”, *Topchubashov Center*, 4 November 2021, <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3437/azerbaijan-to-open-an-embassy-in-israel-why-now>

open an embassy in Israel.<sup>30</sup> The decision, which has since been implemented, may have been facilitated by Israel's growing rehabilitation in the Arab world following the signing of the Abraham accords from September 2020 onwards. Iran accused Azerbaijan of allowing Israel's intelligence and weapons systems to operate near Iran's border. It claimed Azerbaijan was a "puppet" of Israel. Additionally, in November 2022, Iran conducted a provocative military exercise and practised crossing the Aras River, the border between Iran and Azerbaijan.<sup>31</sup> Azerbaijan's President Aliyev strongly condemned Iran's military drills and stated, "We will do our best to protect the secular lifestyle of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis around the world, including Azerbaijanis in Iran."<sup>32</sup> Azerbaijan also arrested some individuals suspected of working with Iranian intelligence.

## Conclusion

Armenia's victory in the first Karabakh war taught Azerbaijan valuable lessons about long-term strategy and regional power dynamics. While the energy trade has been crucial in shaping the relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan, national security considerations have been even more critical. Israel and Azerbaijan have a relationship based on shared practical interests, similar to the relationship between Iran and Armenia. However, the close strategic alliance between Tel Aviv and Baku has negatively affected Tehran-Baku relations. ◆

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<sup>30</sup> "Azerbaijan to Open an Embassy in Israel", *Jewish News Syndicate*, 20 November 2022, <https://www.jns.org/azerbaijan-to-open-embassy-in-israel/>

<sup>31</sup> IRGC Forces Practice Crossing Aras River on Border with Azerbaijan", *Tehran Times*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/477752/IRGC-forces-practice-crossing-Aras-River-on-border-with-Azerbaijan>

<sup>32</sup> "Azerbaijan to Protect All Azerbaijanis including Those in Iran: President", *Yeni Safak*, 25 November 2022, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/azerbaijan-to-protect-all-azerbaijanis-including-those-in-iran-president-3656122>

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# Facing Existential Threats

## A Comparative Analysis of Israeli and Taiwanese Defence Strategies

Christopher K. Colley\* and Jean-Loup Samaan\*\*

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At first sight, Israel and Taiwan share several similarities: both face a security environment shaped by permanent threats (from the Arab states and Iran for Israel and from China for Taiwan). Both rely on a form of protection from the United States – though the degree of that support greatly differs – while maintaining a strong national defence industry.

However, a comparative analysis reveals more differences than similarities in their national defence strategies. This paper examines those differences by looking at the evolution of the security environment in both Israel and Taiwan, their budgetary allocations for defence, and finally the ability of their armed forces to adopt new strategies.

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**R**ussia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reminded European countries of ancient disputes between Moscow and the West, but it also revived the age-old predicament of small states confronting bigger threats at their borders. In other words, how do small states respond to overwhelming threats that may jeopardise their very survival? Such existential concerns lie at the heart of the defence policies

of many countries, but in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it may be worth looking at two specific cases: Israel in the Middle East and Taiwan in East Asia. At first sight, both share several similarities: they face a security environment shaped by permanent threats (from Arab states and Iran for Israel and from China for Taiwan). Both rely on a form of protection from the United States – though the degree of that support greatly differs – while maintaining a strong national defence industry.

Those commonalities would suggest a convergence in their military postures. In fact, Israel's defence structure has long acted as a model for small states in Africa and Asia.<sup>1</sup> However, a comparative analysis of Israel and Taiwan reveals more differences than similarities in their national defence strategies. This paper examines those differences by looking at the evolution of the security environment in both Israel and Taiwan, their budgetary allocations for defence, and finally the ability of their armed forces to adopt new strategies.

## Facing an Evolving Security Environment

Although both Israel and Taiwan may have initially faced somewhat similar threats – conventional armed forces that were superior in quantity but inferior in quality – those threats have greatly changed.

Israel's guiding principles on national defence largely derive from speeches and decisions made by its founding fathers, particularly its first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, in the early years of the state. There is no written document amounting to a permanent (or regularly updated) national security strategy. From the late 1940s, Israel's defence policy was driven by fear of the country's total destruction. Back then, the rejection of Israel's very existence by all its Arab neighbours implied that all wars

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean-Loup Samaan, *Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery* (London: Routledge, 2017); Richard A. Bitzinger, "Military-technological Innovation in Small States: The Cases of Israel and Singapore", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, No.6 (2021), p. 873–900.

would be fought for its survival.<sup>2</sup> Israel's size also meant that an invasion by neighbouring countries could jeopardise its very existence. Therefore, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have been historically trained to avoid fighting on Israel's soil and instead project any conflict onto the territory of its adversaries. This meant a strong inclination towards offensive and preventive doctrines that relied on swift campaigns of short duration.<sup>3</sup>

“Although both Israel and Taiwan may have initially faced somewhat similar threats – conventional armed forces that were superior in quantity but inferior in quality – those threats have greatly changed.”

After several decades focusing on scenarios that involve invasions by one or several Arab neighbouring states, Israel progressively revised its threat assessment. First, the country achieved military superiority vis-à-vis the Arab states after the 1967 war, and the subsequent annual military aid provided by the United States consolidated that advantage. More important perhaps, the threat of an all-out conventional conflict decreased. After the signing of peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), the IDF found itself much less confronted by the prospect of a conventional war than with asymmetrical conflicts involving non-state groups (primarily Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hizballah in Lebanon). Major shifts then occurred. In the years after the second Lebanon war of 2006, the IDF revised its doctrine to consider fighting Hizballah and other non-state groups not as terrorist networks but as proto-armies. Following that 33-day conflict, the IDF went through a major bottom-up review forced by the Winograd Commission. It was then considered that the IDF had been ill-prepared to fight against

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Handel, “The Evolution of Israeli Strategy: The Psychology of Insecurity and the Quest for Absolute Security” in: Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 534-578.

<sup>3</sup> Ariel Levite, *Offense and Defense in Israeli Military Doctrine* (Westview Press, 1989).

the Lebanese organisation because of an emphasis on policing missions, as had been the case in the Palestinian territories in previous years.<sup>4</sup>

**“In the years after the second Lebanon war of 2006, the IDF revised their doctrine to consider fighting Hizballah and other non-state groups not as terrorist networks but as proto-armies.”**

The response to the evolution of non-state threats was to be based on an offensive doctrine emphasising stand-off fire, strategic bombing focused on the enemy’s command centres, and preparation for ground invasion of short duration. This was initially coined the “Dahya doctrine”, a reference to the suburbs of Beirut where Hizballah headquarters were located, and which had been the target of the Israeli Air Force campaign in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

The political objectives of such campaigns were meant to be limited: as the 2015 IDF doctrine acknowledges, these operations cannot achieve the destruction of the enemy, only the weakening of its capacities. Hence the idea of a “campaign between wars”, or, as colloquially described by IDF officers, operations aimed at “mowing the grass”.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Taiwan, its threat environment also has significantly changed in the past decades, but that change did not trigger the necessary adaptation of its military model. For much of the past several decades,

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael Marcus, *Israel’s Long War with Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire* (Georgetown University Press, 2018); Daniel Sobelman, “Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006–16”, *International Security* 41, No. 3 (Winter 2016/17), pp. 151–196.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Loup Samaan, “The ‘Dahya Concept’ and Israeli Military Posture vis-à-vis Hezbollah since 2006”, *Comparative Strategy* 32, No.2, 2013, pp.146–159.

<sup>6</sup> Efraim Inbar, Eitan Shamir, “Mowing the Grass: Israel’s Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, No.1, 2014, pp. 65–90.



Taipei's defence strategy was more geared towards a conventional battle with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and more focused on big (and costly) platforms such as main battle tanks, large surface warships and squadrons of relatively advanced American fighter jets. Such hardware may have been a necessary deterrent until the early 2000s. However, in light of the rapid modernisation of China's military forces and the increasing imbalance between both sides, such a strategy is out of date.<sup>7</sup> In the event of a war with China, many, if not most of Taiwan's high-tech and expensive capabilities would be destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

“Taipei's defence strategy was more geared towards a conventional battle with the PLA and more focused on big (and costly) platforms ... in light of the rapid modernisation of China's military forces and the increasing imbalance between both sides, [depending on such hardware] is out of date.”

Given the rapidly increasing sophistication of the PLA, in 2017, Taiwan's former chief of General Staff, Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, proposed the “Overall Defence Concept”. This defence concept recognised the asymmetric nature of the security situation and called for targeting the PLA at its weakest points. This acknowledgement that Taipei cannot and should not compete with the PLA but needs to enhance its asymmetrical capabilities was welcome news to Taiwan's American supporters.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tanner Greer, “Taiwan's Defense Strategy Does not Make Military Sense”, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/taiwan/2019-09-17/taiwans-defense-strategy-doesnt-make-military-sense>

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Kuo, “The Counter-Intuitive Sensibility of Taiwan's New Defense Strategy”, *War on the Rocks*, 6 December 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/the-counter-intuitive-sensibility-of-taiwans-new-defense-strategy/>

<sup>9</sup> Drew Thompson, “Hope on the Horizon: Taiwan's Radical New Defense Concept”, *War on the Rocks*, 2 October 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/hope-on-the->

However, reports surfaced that shortly after Lee's retirement, the new defence concept was jettisoned and there were rumours that officers were banned from even using the term.<sup>10</sup> Notably the concept does not appear in the 2021 Taiwanese Quadrennial Defence Review.<sup>11</sup>

## National Defence Expenditures and US Security Assistance

A state's defence budget is a critical indicator of its commitment to defence as well as a good measure of how the government assesses its immediate security environment. Given that Beijing sees unification with Taipei as its number one national priority, one would expect to see at the very least a sustained level of government funding for the Taiwanese military. Furthermore, considering the sustained military build-up by the PLA with the goal of taking Taiwan, one would expect to see increases in the Taiwanese defence budget.

However, as the data in Figure 1 demonstrate, the percentage of the Taiwanese defence budget as a share of Taiwan's GDP has surprisingly decreased since the mid-1990s, including during and after the 1995/96 Taiwan crisis when the PLA effectively blockaded the island with missile drills, prompting the Clinton administration to send three carrier battle groups to the vicinity of Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> Of equal importance, the military budget, which at one time was about 5% of GDP, has been hovering at under 2.5% since 2001, whereas the PLA has undergone rapid development since the turn of the century. Figure 2 demonstrates a

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[horizon-taiwans-radical-new-defense-concept/#:~:text=Taiwan's%20new%20defense%20concept%20employs,it%20is%20at%20its%20weakest.](#)

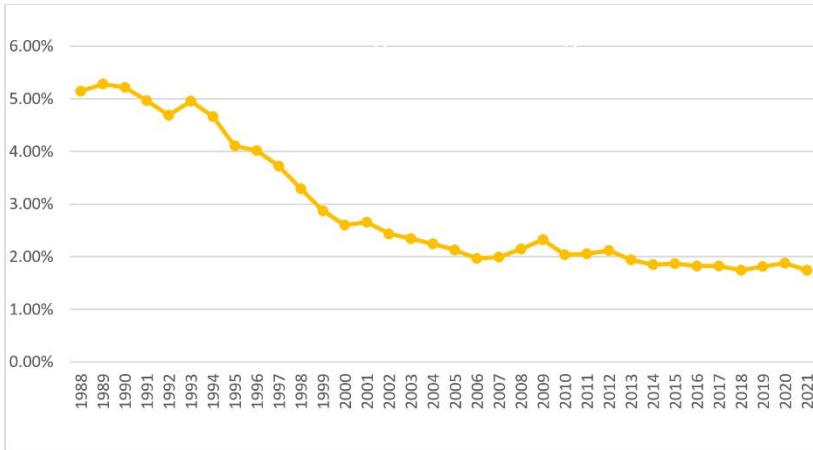
<sup>10</sup> Michael Hunzeker, "Taiwan's Defense Plans Are Going off the Rails", *War On The Rocks*, 18 November 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/taiwans-defense-plans-are-going-off-the-rails/>

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of National Defense, Republic of China, "2021 Quadrennial Defense Review", <https://bit.ly/3pUcWNU>

<sup>12</sup> Christopher K. Colley, *The Nexus of Naval Modernization in India and China* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

similar downward trajectory in the Taiwanese defence budget in terms of the share of overall government spending.

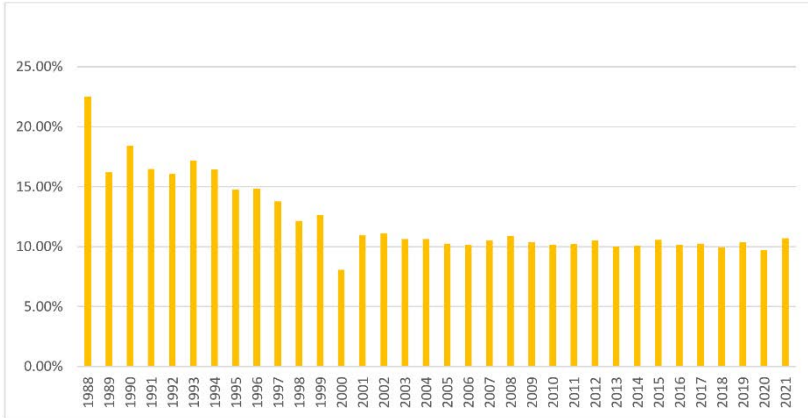
**Figure 1. Taiwan’s Defence Budget as a Percentage of GDP**



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

From a purely budgetary perspective, the military has been a decreasing priority for the Taiwanese government. But, considering the constant (and likely increasing) threat of an invasion from the mainland, one would expect to find an upward trajectory in defence spending. Overall, based on the available empirical data, it is clear over the past several decades that Taipei does not prioritise military spending as a pressing national security issue.

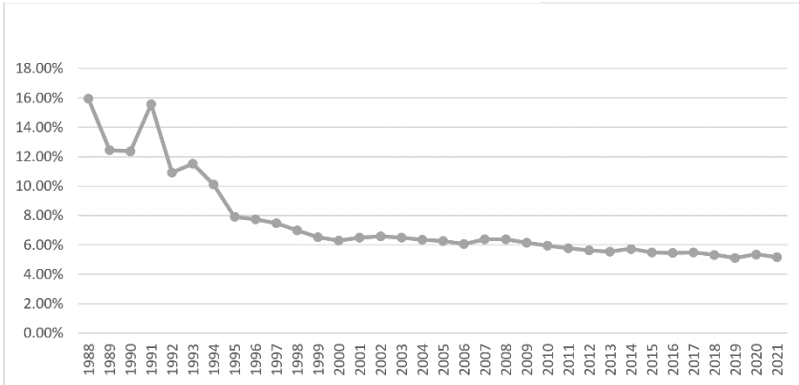
**Figure 2. Taiwan’s Defence Budget as a Share of Government Spending**



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

The evolution of Taiwanese defence spending is all the more striking when compared with the Israeli case. Figure 3 represents the trajectory of Israel’s defence budget as a percentage of GDP during the same period. The first and most obvious difference relates to the fact that the IDF constantly received a bigger share of GDP than its counterpart in Taipei (16% in 1988 against 5% that same year for the Taiwanese military and 5.1% in 2021 versus barely 2% in 2021). Admittedly, Israeli military expenditure decreased sharply in the early 1990s. This decrease can be attributed to the decline of Arab state threat, especially as the fall of the Soviet Union triggered a reduction in Moscow’s military aid to states like Syria. Since then, the defence share of GDP has remained stable and reflects rather accurately the needs of Israel’s security environment.

**Figure 3. Israel’s Defence Budget as a Percentage of GDP**



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

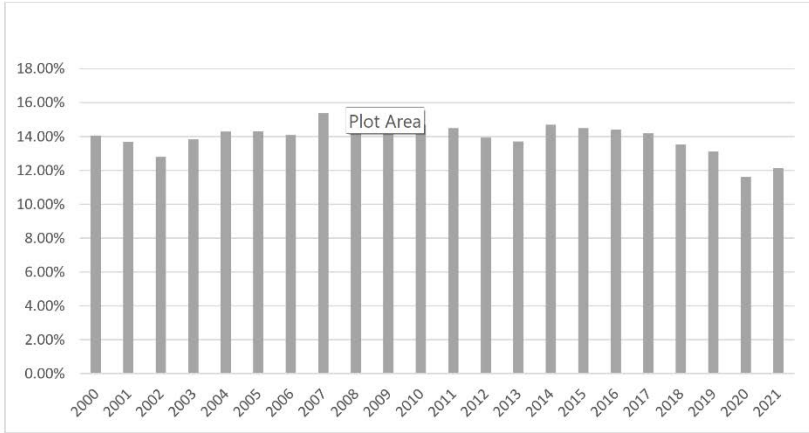
Furthermore, whereas Israel benefits from the highest military aid package provided by the United States to any foreign country, American support for Taiwan has been much more uneven.<sup>13</sup> Since the passing of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, Washington maintains “unofficial” relations with the government in Taipei and although it provides armaments support to the Republic of China Armed Forces (ROCAF), such support is rendered under the framework of foreign military sales, *not* foreign aid.<sup>14</sup> Even the most ambitious proposals currently under discussion in the US Congress to increase military support to Taiwan do not consider the type of assistance provided to Israel.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Sharp, “US Foreign Aid to Israel”, Congressional Research Service, 18 February 2022, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Larence and Caitlin Campbell, “Taiwan: Political and Security Issues”, Congressional Research Service, 10 January 2023, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bryant Harris and Joe Gould, “Senate to Add \$10 billion in Taiwan aid, Scale Back Arms Sale Reform”, *Defense News*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/budget/2022/10/17/senate-to-add-10-billion-in-taiwan-aid-scale-back-arms-sale-reform/>

**Figure 4. Israel’s Defence Budget as a Share of Government Spending**



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

## Resistance to the Adoption of Military Reforms

When it comes to military reforms, both the IDF and the ROCAF have experienced resistance from within their ranks. Although Israel succeeded in adapting to non-state threats from Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, its officers increasingly express frustration over the feeling that the military campaigns directed at these threats are no longer decisive, being limited in design, and do not bring about any sense of victory. In fact, prompted by this concern, then Chief of Defence Aviv Kochavi introduced a new military concept in 2019 called “Decisive Victory”.

The concept was aimed at driving vast reform of the IDF and had ramifications in terms of training, inter-operability among the services, weapons procurement and civil-military relations. It involved swift offensive operations relying on the use of smaller units supported by massive firepower. In his speeches, LG Kochavi explained that “at the heart of the multi-year concept is increasing lethality in quantity and

precision”. To undertake such increases, the IDF would rely on “greatly enhanced ability to expose the enemy, greatly enhanced ability to destroy the enemy, and multi-branch operations”.<sup>16</sup>

“Although Israel succeeded in adapting to non-state threats . . . , its officers increasingly express frustration over the feeling that the military campaigns directed at these threats are no longer decisive, being limited in design, and do not bring about any sense of victory.”

In the same vein, Brigadier-General Eran Ortal, head of the Dado Center – the IDF’s internal body for developing military concepts – explained that the new strategy involved the ability “to attack deep into enemy territory to conquer main nerve centers and inflict a decisive defeat, while suppressing enemy rockets and missiles launched nearby toward Israeli forces and toward the home front”.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the strategy was aimed at escalating very early and very quickly.

Meanwhile, after years of political complacency, Taiwan came to terms with the need for a genuine change in its strategy against the overwhelming force of the PRC. Specifically, this translated into a debate over the introduction of a so-called Porcupine Strategy. While the Overall Defence Concept may not be in vogue in certain sectors of power in Taipei, Taiwan’s American backers are pushing the island to adapt to the new strategic reality in the Taiwan Strait. The concept of a Porcupine Strategy, where Taiwan would adopt an asymmetric war strategy vis-à-vis the mainland, has entered the military lexicon. At the core of this strategy is the belief that Taiwan’s military needs to be

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<sup>16</sup> Amiram Barkat, “Chief of Staff Launches Plan for ‘More Lethal’ IDF”, *Globes*, 13 February 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Eran Ortal, “Turn on the Light, Extinguish the Fire: Israel’s New Way of War”, *War on the Rocks*, 19 January 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/01/turn-on-the-light-extinguish-the-fire-israels-new-way-of-war/>

nimbler and lighter in order to fend off, or at least hold off, the PLA until American forces arrive in the vicinity of Taiwan. Instead of purchasing destroyers, main battle tanks and F-16 fighter jets, Taiwan would acquire smaller asymmetrical capabilities such as through stockpiles of Stinger hand-held anti-aircraft missiles, Javelin anti-tank missiles and sea mines.<sup>18</sup>

“Given the accelerating pace of China’s military modernisation and the relative stagnation of Taiwan’s forces, pushback in Taipei against the “Porcupine Strategy” seems puzzling.”

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Biden administration has prioritised sending Kiev hardware designed for asymmetric warfare and has also begun pushing Taipei to adopt a strategy more in line with the Porcupine Strategy. American officials are reportedly telling their Taiwanese counterparts that they will reject requests for large weapons systems and will instead push for supplying a greater number of more agile mobile weapons. For example, in September 2022, 60 Harpoon coastal anti-ship missiles were included in a US\$1.1 billion arms deal with Taiwan.<sup>19</sup> This contrasts with Taiwanese requests for M1A2 tanks and MH-60R Seahawk helicopters, which Washington has discouraged.<sup>20</sup>

Both the Porcupine Strategy and the Decisive Victory concepts have been met with considerable pushback in Taipei and Tel Aviv. Given the accelerating pace of China’s military modernisation and the relative

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<sup>18</sup> “What is Taiwan’s Porcupine Defence Strategy?” *The Economist*, 10 May 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Wong and John Ismay, “US Aims to Turn Taiwan Into Giant Weapons Depot”, *The New York Times*, 22 October 2022,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/05/us/politics/taiwan-biden-weapons-china.html>

<sup>20</sup> Edward Wong and Eric Schmitt, “US Speeds Up Reshaping of Taiwan’s Defenses to Deter China”, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2022,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/us/politics/china-taiwan-military.html>



stagnation of Taiwan's forces, pushback in Taipei seems puzzling. Raymond Kuo, a researcher with the Rand Corporation, argues that Taiwan continues to pursue "prestige capabilities" for political reasons. He says, "scrapping its fighter aircraft and submarines forces means that Taipei must accept a higher risk of a successful Chinese amphibious landing. It must also expend significant political capital and effort to convince its population to fight a prolonged war of attrition."<sup>21</sup> President Biden's assertion that the United States will defend Taiwan if China were to carry out an "unprecedented attack" – a perceived shift from Washington's previous concept of "strategic ambiguity" – may partially alleviate Taipei's concerns, but it still leaves open the question of how committed the United States is to Taiwan's security. Importantly, the White House has stated that the American policy is unchanged and that the Biden Administration still adheres to the "One China Policy."<sup>22</sup>

**“Whereas the IDF is trying to extract itself from the cycle of endless low-intensity campaigns against Palestinian groups, Taiwan’s armed forces must urgently reform itself to remain credible vis-à-vis the PLA.”**

Meanwhile in Israel, the Decisive Victory concept may have been branded as a shift in the IDF strategy but it looked more like the prolongation of previous trends. It relies on a military philosophy that is not new and has its roots in the US armed forces' "Revolution in Military Affairs" of the 1990s and its assimilation by the IDF.<sup>23</sup> At operational

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<sup>21</sup> Raymond Kuo, "The Counter-Intuitive Sensibility of Taiwan's New Defense Strategy".

<sup>22</sup> Michael Schuman, "No More 'Strategic Ambiguity' on Taiwan", *The Atlantic*, 22 September 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/09/joe-biden-taiwan-china-strategic-ambiguity/671512/>

<sup>23</sup> Eliot Cohen, Michael Eisenstadt and Andrew Bacevich, *Knives, Tanks, and Missiles: Israel's Security Revolution*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998; Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

level, it emphasises manoeuvrability stand-off fire, joint operations, and heavy reliance on new technology to accelerate the decision-making process. Eventually, the level of continuity in the Israeli military strategy was evidenced in the way the IDF has fought against Palestinian organisations since 2019 – be it against Hamas in May 2021 or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in August 2022. Consequently, a significant number of Israeli commentators dismiss the Decisive Victory concept as a “PR stunt” that has “no direct relevance for the battleground”.<sup>24</sup>

Both the Israeli and Taiwanese cases reveal common challenges facing armed forces in the adoption of a new strategy, but the implications of those difficulties differ greatly: whereas the IDF is trying to extract itself from the cycle of endless low-intensity campaigns against Palestinian groups, the ROCAF must urgently reform itself to remain credible vis-à-vis the PLA. Only then can it impress upon the PLA that the costs of an invasion of Taiwan would be costly for China.

## Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the defence policies pursued by Israel and Taiwan shows the distinct trajectory each has followed in the past decades. While both face existential threats, Israel has proved more effective at adapting to the evolution of its security environment. For the most part of its existence, Taiwan’s armed forces have adhered to an offensive posture vis-à-vis China that has increasingly proven untenable as the PLA increases its military superiority in the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan’s defence strategy lacks a coherent asymmetric approach to the increasing threat from the mainland. Considering that the PRC’s most recent White Paper on Taiwan made it clear that “resolving the Taiwan question ... is indispensable for the realisation of China’s rejuvenation”,<sup>25</sup> it is striking that Taiwan not only lacks a well-planned

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<sup>24</sup> Authors’ interviews with Israeli military analysts, October 2021.

<sup>25</sup> The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office, People’s Republic of China, “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in

strategy, but has also allowed the defence budget to decline as a share of GDP for several decades. Although there have been recent proposals for defence spending increases of roughly 15%,<sup>26</sup> this modest amount does not reflect a sense of urgency or concern for the island's political survival. The announcement that compulsory military service will be extended from four months to one year starting in 2024 shows an increase in commitment,<sup>27</sup> but it pales in comparison with the Israeli case. Israel has an enormous military advantage over its Arab rivals and has soundly defeated them on the battlefield numerous times over the past 75 years. Yet, the Israeli state still requires compulsory military service from its citizens in order to ensure its national survival. While both Taiwan and Israel are located in hostile neighborhoods, Israel has taken more drastic measures to address those challenges than Taiwan.

“Israel has proved more effective at adapting to the evolution of its security environment. ... Taiwan’s armed forces have adhered to an offensive posture vis-à-vis China that has increasingly proven untenable as the PLA increases its military superiority in the Taiwan Strait.”

This does not mean that the IDF is immune to failure: its inability to decisively win wars against Hizballah (2006) or Hamas (2008; 2012; 2014; 2021) calls for a sobering assessment of its performance. But,

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the New Era”, 10 August 2022, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content\\_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html)

<sup>26</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “Is Beijing’s Long Game on Taiwan About to End? Peaceful Unification, Brinkmanship, and Military Takeover”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28 September 2022.

<sup>27</sup> “Taiwan Increases its Compulsory Military Service as it Faces Pressure from China”, The Associated Press, 27 December 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/27/1145594497/taiwan-compulsory-military-service-china>

despite its shortcomings, the IDF has been able to reinvent itself (several times). Although the ROCAF cannot – and should not – consider the Israeli model as a mere recipe to apply, there are aspects of the Israeli military transformation that could prove useful, be it the cultivation of closer civil-military relations, the development of its military-industrial complex, or the dissemination of new military concepts within the armed forces. ◆

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# The Role of Holocaust Studies in Shaping China's Views of Israel

Xu Shijie\*

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Holocaust consciousness has risen in China in the past three decades alongside a surge of Holocaust studies. This article examines how this development has influenced China's perception of Israel. It argues that although the opening of a Holocaust discourse, as well as efforts to highlight the shared Holocaust memory between the two countries, did not play a decisive role in shaping China's diplomatic policy towards Israel, it nevertheless contributed to maintaining positive relations between the two countries. Furthermore, the inclusion of Holocaust history as a mandatory component of school education in China may serve to foster empathy towards Jews and Israel among China's younger generations and could influence their perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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**T**he emergence of Holocaust studies in China can be attributed to the normalisation of relations between China and the Western world, particularly the United States, during the 1970s, when China started integrating itself into the global community. Until then, the Holocaust was not brought to the attention of the Chinese public. On

the external front, President Nixon's 1972 visit to China initiated the process of normalising relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States. Simultaneously, it opened up China to Holocaust-related books and films that were prevalent in the English-speaking world.<sup>1</sup> Two examples of this are *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, translated and published by Joint Publishing in 1974, and *The Winds of War*, published by People's Literature Publishing House in 1975. Domestically, the implementation of economic reforms and open door policy in China from 1978 onwards also prepared China to join the process of intellectual globalisation. The establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Israel in 1992, which marked the end of China's anti-Israeli ideology, further facilitated the development of Holocaust studies in China as a field of academic inquiry.

## The Emergence of Holocaust Studies in China

Holocaust studies in China have always been closely tied to politics, no matter the silence on the topic prior to the 1970s or the boom after it. Chinese people became aware of the plight of European Jews as early as the wartime era, when an estimated 25,000 Jews fled to Shanghai and settled there.<sup>2</sup> Sun Ke, the leader of China's Nationalist government, endeavoured to draft a plan for settling the Jewish refugees in southwest China. Despite the ultimate failure of this initiative due to financial constraints, China's firm stance against anti-Semitism and its welcoming attitude towards Jews were evident.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miles William F. S, "Third World Views of the Holocaust", *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 3 (2004): 371–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462352042000265855>.

<sup>2</sup> Wang Jian, "Tracking the Exact Number of Jewish Refugees in Shanghai", in *China and Ashkenazic Jewry: Transcultural Encounters*, ed. Kathryn Hellerstein and Lihong Song (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter Press, 2022), 129–44.

<sup>3</sup> Saunders Harril, "Importing Development: The Chinese Nationalists Embrace of Jewish Settlement Plans during World War II", *Penn History Review*, no. 6 (2022): 102–34.

The coming to power of the Communist government in 1949 brought a turning point to China's perception of the Holocaust. Closely allied with the Soviet Union from 1949 to 1959, nascent China, like many other countries under communist rule,<sup>4</sup> adopted the Soviet interpretation of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Struggling against nationalism, Soviet historians omitted the background of the Nazis' victims in their writing of the war's history. The Jewish identity of the victims was not emphasised, nor was the Jewish suffering (the Holocaust), as the Soviets believed that portraying the Jewish tragedy as a unique phenomenon would promote the development of Jewish nationalism. Instead, the Soviets referred to all of the Nazis' victims as "peaceful Soviet citizens".<sup>6</sup>

**“Holocaust studies in China have always been closely tied to politics, no matter the silence on the topic prior to the 1970s or the boom after it.”**

In the contemporaneous Chinese narrative of the Second World War, the idea of the Holocaust was likewise overlooked. The war narrative in Chinese historical school textbooks (which could well represent the official Chinese narrative) neither emphasised nor even mentioned the concept of racism when talking about the Nazi atrocities in Europe. Instead, China referred to people worldwide who suffered from fascist

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, according to the Second World War narrative in socialist Yugoslavia, all victims of the war were defined as “victims of fascism”, without addressing their ethnic backgrounds. Vervaeke Stijn, *Holocaust, War and Transnational Memory: Testimony from Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2018), xi–xix.

<sup>5</sup> Goldstein Jonathan, “Holocaust and Jewish Studies in Modern China: Functions of a Political Agenda”, in *Holocaust Memory in a Globalizing World*, ed. Jacob S. Eder, Philipp Gassert, and Alan E. Steinweis (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag), 228–44.

<sup>6</sup> Hnatiuk Ola, “How the Soviet Union Suppressed the Holocaust to Fight ‘Nationalism’”, *Ukrainian Jewish Encounter*,

<https://ukrainianjewishencounter.org/en/soviet-union-suppressed-holocaust-fight-nationalism/>.

rule as “the victims of fascism”. In the following decade, despite the political break between China and the Soviet Union, the Chinese narrative remained the same, making it virtually impossible for Chinese scholars to conduct extensive Holocaust studies.<sup>7</sup>

“The shift in the political climate in China in the 1970s, prompted by Nixon’s visit in 1972 and China’s economic reforms and open door policy in 1978 enabled China to join in the process of intellectual globalisation, preparing the country to initiate Holocaust studies.”

The shift in the political climate in China in the 1970s, prompted by Nixon’s visit in 1972 and China’s economic reforms and open door policy in 1978 enabled China to join in the process of intellectual globalisation, preparing the country to initiate Holocaust studies. Then, in 1992, with the formal rapprochement between China and Israel after several years of negotiations, Holocaust studies were established in China. A major sign of this development was the increasing number of books and articles published in the Chinese language on a variety of Jewish and Israeli topics. Along with translated works, books related to the Holocaust that were originally written by Chinese scholars started to appear on the Chinese book market. For instance, *600 Wan Youtai Ren Hun Duan Ouluoba: Di Er Ci Shijie Da Zhan Zhong Nacui Tusha Youtai Ren Ji Shi* [Six Million Jews Dying in Europe: The Record of the Nazi Holocaust in World War II] written by Zhu Jianjin and published in 1995 is one of the works that specifically focus on the history of the Holocaust. The 1992 book *Shanghai Youtai Ren* [The Jews in Shanghai] by Tang Peiji is another academic work published at a relatively early stage that contained a description of the Holocaust. Moreover, several research

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<sup>7</sup> Xin Xu, “Holocaust Studies in China”, *Journal of Henan*, no. 23 (2003): 101–103.



institutions began holding domestic and international conferences on Holocaust/Jewish studies.

“The establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Israel in 1992, which marked the end of China’s anti-Israeli ideology, further facilitated the development of Holocaust studies in China as a field of academic inquiry.”

After the initial development of Holocaust studies in China, Chinese scholars started attempting a comparative approach to Holocaust studies in the late 1990s. *The Nanking Massacre and Auschwitz Concentration Camp* by Chen Chune and Zhang Yikang published in 1995 is one of the pioneering works in this regard. In the following decades, such works increased in volume. The Nanking Massacre, carried out by Japanese troops in the Chinese city of Nanking during the Second World War, has become the most commonly used case to compare with the Holocaust although it could not be defined as a genocide according to the UN’s definition. The comparisons in these Chinese works mainly focus on the details of the mass killings, the causes of the atrocities – imperialism, fascism, and racism are usually held as the common causes of the two events – and the post-war attitudes of Germany and Japan towards their wartime crimes, with Germany’s willingness to confess its crimes being held in sharp contrast with Japan’s resistance to doing likewise.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Xu Saifeng, “Zhanbai Qian Riben de Zhongzu Zhuyi Ji Qi Tezheng – Yu Nacui Deguo Xiang Bijiao [‘Racism’ in Japanese Fascist Thought and Its Features – Compared with Nazi Germany]”, *Journal of Beihua University*, no. 2 (2020): 99–107. See also, Ma Zhendu, “Qinhua Rijun Baoxing Yu Nacui Baoxing Yuanyin Bijiao Yanjiu Chutan [A Comparative Study of the Causes of Japanese Atrocities and Nazi Atrocities]”, *Journal of Republican Archives*, no. 2 (2007): 120–28. Yang Xiaming and Neil Gregor, “Nacui Tusha Yu Nanjing Baoxing de Yanjiu: Fanshi Zhuanbian Yu Bijiao Qishi [Holocaust

A similar trend can be observed in the education sector, with Jewish/Holocaust topics being gradually upgraded in school curricula.<sup>9</sup> Since the 21st century, fascist atrocities during the Second World War have been incorporated into secondary school history textbooks as part of a section devoted to the history of the war. From 2007 onwards, the narratives of the Nanking Massacre and the Holocaust started to be paralleled in the textbooks. Apart from in-class lessons, students are assigned homework that compares German and Japanese attitudes towards the crimes they committed during the war.<sup>10</sup>

**“From 2007 onwards, the narratives of the Nanking Massacre and the Holocaust started to be paralleled in [secondary school history] textbooks.”**

Furthermore, there has been an increasing interest in exploring the shared history of the Chinese and Jewish peoples. The history of the Shanghai and Harbin Jews during the Second World War has emerged as a popular topic in academic circles. Numerous examples can be found in publications by the Shanghai Centre for Jewish Studies, which was established in 1988. These include *Jinian Naxie Toushen Zhong Gong Fan Faxisi Tongyi Zhanxian De Guoji Youren – Yi Shanghai Wei Qieru Dian* [A commemoration of the international friends who joined the Communist Party’s anti-fascist united front – Shanghai as a starting point], *Youtai Ren Zai Zhongguo: Chuanqi, Shishi He Toushi* [Jews in China: Legend, History,

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Historiography and Nanking Atrocity – Paradigm Shift and New Perspectives’], *Journal of Nanking University*, no. 3 (2010): 83–93.

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein Jonathan, “Holocaust and Jewish Studies in Modern China. Functions of a Political Agenda”, in *Holocaust Memory in a Globalizing World*, ed. Jacob S Eder, Philipp Gassert, and Alan E Steinweis (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017), 228–44.

<sup>10</sup> See People’s Education Press, *Lishi: Ersbi Shiji de Zhanzheng Yu Heping* [The War and Peace of the 20th Century] (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 2007); See also, People’s Education Press, *Shijie Wenhua Yichan Huicui* [World History: The Cultural Heritage Collection] (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 2007).

and Perspective], and *Youtai Binan Shi Shang De “Zhongguo Moshi”* [The “Chinese Model” in the History of Jewish Asylum], all written by Pan Guang, a leading scholar in China in the fields of Holocaust studies and Jewish studies. Additionally, numerous studies appeared on the history of Harbin Jews and the Jewish heritage in Harbin, such as *Harbin Youtai Qiaomin Shi* [A History of the Jews of Harbin] by Liu Shuang and *20 Shiji Shang Ban Qi Harbin Youtair Ren De Zongjiao Shenghuo Yu Zhengzhi Shenghuo* [Harbin Jews in the Early 20th Century: Their Political and Religious Lives] by Wang Zhijun and Li Wei. All these works illustrated that the diaspora of European Jews and the intertwining of Jewish and Chinese history in the modern era were primarily caused by European anti-Semitism. Moreover, these works stress that Jews in China experienced relatively normal lives, in contrast to their unfortunate experiences in Europe, as anti-Semitism never took root in China.

With the efforts of Chinese scholars in the past four decades, Holocaust studies in China have moved out of their infancy. The increasing number of publications reflects two main research interests: (i) comparative studies of the Holocaust, often using the Nanking Massacre as a reference point; and (ii) explorations of the shared history of the Jewish and Chinese peoples, examining the Jewish experience in China before, during and after the Holocaust. Both approaches have led to the indigenisation of the Holocaust in China, linking together seemingly unconnected groups of people – Chinese and Jews.

## Holocaust Studies and Sino-Israeli Relations

Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the rise of Holocaust studies in China is purely the result of China’s political climate change since the 1970s, politics has nevertheless played a decisive role in the development of Holocaust studies in China. In turn, China’s opening of Holocaust discourse and its engagement in Holocaust studies have also had some positive political implications for Sino-Israeli relations.

The relationship between China and Israel is primarily based on mutual interests, particularly in the areas of economics and technology. The increasing volume of bilateral trade between the two countries<sup>11</sup> and the growing investment by Chinese companies in Israeli advanced technologies<sup>12</sup> have been significant factors driving the development of their relationship, although the announcement of China's strategic plan ("Made in China 2025") is expected to create direct competition in the hi-tech sector between the two countries in the future.<sup>13</sup>

**“Recognising each other’s histories remains a crucial foundation for [the Israel-China] relationship, and the Holocaust has become a significant factor in this process.”**

In the economics-driven bilateral relations between China and Israel, the influence of Holocaust history appears to hold relatively less weight in shaping China's diplomatic policy towards Israel. However, it is still essential to note that recognising each other's histories remains a crucial foundation for their relationship, and the Holocaust has become a significant factor in this process. Recent trends suggest that the

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<sup>11</sup> Based on the data provided by the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), it is evident that the volume of bilateral trade between China and Israel has increased significantly in the past two decades, from US\$192 million (China to Israel) and US\$145 million (Israel to China) in 1995 to US\$13.2 billion and US\$7.15 billion, respectively, in 2021. “China (CHN) and Israel (ISR) Trade | OEC”, OEC, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/isr?dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year1995&dynamicYearGeomapSelector=year1995>.

<sup>12</sup> Ella Doron, “A Regulatory Mechanism to Oversee Foreign Investment in Israel: Security Ramifications”, *INSS Insight*, no. 1229 (2019): 1–4, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/a-regulatory-mechanism-to-oversee-foreign-investment-in-israel-security-ramifications/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ella Doron, “A Regulatory Mechanism to Oversee Foreign Investment in Israel: Security Ramifications”.

Holocaust has gradually been incorporated into Sino-Israeli diplomacy, serving as a bridge linking the two nations through their shared history to facilitate future communication. This is evident in the frequent references to the Holocaust in diplomatic discourse and activities between China and Israel.

“Recent trends suggest that the Holocaust has gradually been incorporated into Sino-Israeli diplomacy, serving as a bridge linking the two nations through their shared history to facilitate future communication.”

As interest in the study of the Shanghai and Harbin Jews has grown, several related institutions have been established or reopened in these two cities, including the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum, which was established in 2007 with the Ohel Moshe Synagogue as its main body, and the Harbin Jewish Cemetery, which has been repaired several times since 1977.

However, these Holocaust memorial sites have gradually taken on political roles. Holocaust commemoration has always been a part of Israel’s state visits to China, and the Holocaust institutions in China have thus become significant diplomatic venues. Ehud Olmert, who was Israel’s prime minister from 2006 to 2009 and has family roots in Harbin, made multiple visits to China. During his visit in 2004, when he was vice prime minister, he visited his grandfather’s grave at the Harbin Jewish Cemetery.<sup>14</sup> He said his family’s wartime sojourn in China left him with a profound memory of the country. His public speech expressed his wish for greater friendship between China and Israel. He was quoted as saying: “My grandfather will remain here forever, so this place is of great

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<sup>14</sup> Li Fangchao, “Israel Deputy PM Visits Grandpa’s Harbin Grave”. *China Daily*, 20 June 26 2004, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/26/content\\_342861.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/26/content_342861.htm).

significance to me. ... The place has become the symbol of the friendship between China and Israel.”<sup>15</sup> Similar expressions of affinity were used to maintain the partnership between Israel and China during his 2007 tour:

China is the country which hosted our parents. They studied in China. They spoke Chinese, and the Chinese culture is part of my heritage and memory as a young kid in the State of Israel. So China is not just another country for me.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to maintaining a positive relationship with China, the primary objective of Olmert’s state visit on that occasion was to seek China’s support regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. Israel faced an increasingly significant threat from the Iranian nuclear project, and China potentially held the capability to play a growing role in Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>17</sup> Although Olmert is no longer a member of Israel’s ruling elite, his political influence on Sino-Israeli affairs may not have completely diminished. In 2021, he published an article in *The Jerusalem Post* advocating that Israel maintain its economic ties with China despite America’s ongoing economic war against China.<sup>18</sup> In 2013, when Olmert’s successor as prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, made an official trip to China, he visited the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum, a

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<sup>15</sup> Li Fangchao, “Israel Deputy PM Visits Grandpa’s Harbin Grave”.

<sup>16</sup> Goldstein Jonathan, “‘Not Just Another Country’: The Olmert Family Sojourn Through China as a Case Study of the Role of Travel in Jewish Identity Formation”, *Jewish Culture and History*, no.11: 267–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2009.10512128>.

<sup>17</sup> “Olmert Seeks China Support on Iran”, *Al Jazeera*, January 9, 2007, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2007/1/9/olmert-seeks-china-support-on-iran>.

<sup>18</sup> Olmert Ehud, “The US Is Our Ally, China Is Not Our Enemy – Opinion”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 2 September 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/the-us-is-our-ally-china-is-not-our-enemy-opinion-678550>.

Holocaust memorial site. Netanyahu lauded Shanghai for its role as a haven for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.<sup>19</sup>

Commemorating the Holocaust and expressing sympathy for the Jewish victims has also been part of Chinese leaders' routine during state visits to Israel. In 2000, China's then president, Jiang Zemin, undertook his country's first state visit to Israel. As part of his six-day visit, President Jiang went to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, where he signed the guest book and laid wreaths in the Memorial Hall.<sup>20</sup> Following a five-year interval, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing visited Yad Vashem during his trip to Israel and followed the same routine.<sup>21</sup> More recently, in 2018, then Vice President Wang Qishan visited Yad Vashem during his Israel trip and paid his respects in a similar manner.

“Holocaust commemoration has always been a part of  
Israel’s state visits to China, and the Holocaust  
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As history plays a significant role in shaping a country's identity and attitudes towards other nations and peoples, China's recognition of Jewish history, as evidenced by the opening up of Holocaust discourse, active involvement in Holocaust studies and restoration of Holocaust memorial sites, represents an important diplomatic gesture that signals China's positive disposition towards Israel. By acknowledging the shared

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<sup>19</sup> “Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu Salutes ‘Haven’ of Shanghai”, *South China Morning Post*, 7 May 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1232285/israeli-leader-netanyahu-visits-shanghais-old-jewish-ghetto>.

<sup>20</sup> “Israel: President Jiang Zemin’s Visit”, AP Archive, <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/07406c70c53dff7ba019543eaac4704>.

<sup>21</sup> Fried Stefanie and Gil Somekh, “Chinese Vice President to Visit Yad Vashem Tomorrow”, Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org/press-release/23-october-2018-08-37.html.f>.

history and past sufferings of both the Jewish and Chinese peoples, mutual respect has been established between the two nations, which serves as a foundation for the Sino-Israeli relationship, driven primarily by common interests in the economic and hi-tech sectors.

## **Holocaust Studies and Views of Israel among China's Young Generations**

As noted above, the history of the Holocaust has been included as a mandatory part of the curriculum in Chinese secondary schools since the 2000s. This has not only raised awareness of the Holocaust in China but also stimulated the interest of China's younger generations in Israel and Jewish studies. An increasing number of students are now dedicating themselves to these fields, with many of them writing their MA or PhD

“Studying the Holocaust alongside the Nanking Massacre ... may lead to a more positive view of Israel and Jews among Chinese youths [but] it also carries the potential to generate a bias in their perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

dissertations on related topics.<sup>22</sup> This trend has had a positive impact on the development of Israel and Jewish studies in China. Additionally, in recent years, there has been a rise in the number of pro-Israeli and

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<sup>22</sup> According to the data provided by CNKI, the largest academic database in China, the number of MA/PhD theses including “Jew” in their titles has greatly increased since 2000, reaching a total of 2,233. In addition, there are more than 30 MA/PhD theses directly related to the Holocaust. “Search-CNKI”, CNKI, <https://chn.oversea.cnki.net/kns/defaultresult/index>.



Jewish-friendly discourse in China. Studying the Holocaust alongside the Nanking Massacre provides a shared psychological foundation for Chinese students to empathise with the past sufferings of the Jews. While this phenomenon may lead to a more positive view of Israel and Jews among Chinese youths, it also carries the potential to generate a bias in their perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ◆

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# Interfaith Diplomacy as a Path Towards Israel-Indonesia Relations?

Nazhath Faheema and Syera Anggreini Buntara\*

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*Indonesia's policy towards Israel has been dominated by its support for the Palestinian cause and has a strong anti-Israel character. This is due to pressure from the country's Muslim community. Before attempting to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, the world's largest Muslim country must therefore first try to ease hostile sentiments towards Israel. Interfaith diplomacy – an approach that was highlighted in the Abraham Accords signed by Israel and several countries in the Middle East since September 2020 – may chart a path for Indonesia to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, provided such normalisation does not compromise Indonesia's solidarity with Palestine.*

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The prominence of interfaith dialogue is a peculiar feature of the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco in 2020, followed by Sudan in 2021.<sup>1</sup> The name of the accords, taking after Abraham, a revered figure in the religious tradition of Judaism,

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<sup>1</sup> US State Department, “The Abraham Accords – Declaration”, 13 January 2021, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

Christianity and Islam, profiles the centrality of inter-religious dialogue (IRD) in what has been widely considered a historic diplomatic breakthrough in the Middle East.

While political, security and economic considerations were far more important forces driving the Arab countries to establish relations with Israel, the interfaith diplomacy apparently at play is intriguing. Looking at how IRD<sup>2</sup> may have helped to shift the foreign policies of the Arab states that had longstanding hostile relations with Israel can provide some insights into how Muslim-majority countries in Asia, notably, Indonesia, can move forward in their relations with Israel.

Few studies have explored the role of interfaith diplomacy in global politics.<sup>3</sup> In a recent paper, Paul Hedges suggested that IRD can serve as part of track 1.5 diplomacy to build social cohesion and peace across countries.<sup>4</sup> Based on this observation and other views, this paper explores whether IRD can play a part in shifting Indonesia's diplomatic relationship with Israel.

## The Muslim World and Interfaith Diplomacy

The idea of a Jewish state has always been a thorny issue for the Muslim world, extending from the Middle East to other parts of the world. This was due in part to the narratives that portray the Jewish people as enemies of Islam, based on unbalanced interpretations of the incidents

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Cornille, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), xii. Inter-Religious Dialogue (IRD) is defined as “any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions”. In this paper, the terms interfaith and interreligious dialogue are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> John Fahy and Jeffrey Haynes, “Introduction: Interfaith on the World Stage”, *The Review of Faith: International Affairs* 16, no. 3 (2018): pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2018.1509278>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hedges, “Is Interreligious Dialogue in International Relations ‘Dialogue-Washing’ for Authoritarian Regimes? An Exploration of KAICIID and ICCS as Track 1.5 Diplomacy”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2023): 67–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2023.2200276>

that happened in Medina from 623 to 632 CE.<sup>5</sup> Some hostile encounters that the Prophet Muhammad had with the Jewish tribes during that period and the Qur'anic verses relating to those incidents<sup>6</sup> have been generalised and accentuated. Mixed with the Nazi anti-Semitic discourse and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, hatred between Jewish and Muslim communities deepened in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is driven by various factors such as history, nationalism, occupation of land, security and geopolitics, framing it as a war between the Jewish state and the Muslim *umma* has been the most effective propaganda in contemporary international politics. This faith-based narrative has affected the policies of Islamic states and Muslim-majority countries towards Israel.

“While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is driven by factors such as history, nationalism, occupation of land, security and geopolitics, framing it as a war between the Jewish state and the Muslim *umma* has been the most effective propaganda in contemporary international politics.”

Egypt and Jordan have had full diplomatic relations with Israel since the Camp David Accords of 1979 and the Israel–Jordan Treaty of Peace of 1994, respectively. Thereafter, positive relations between Israel and Muslim countries seemed impossible. Despite some covert relations with Israel, Muslim countries have long been driven in their outward policy on Israel by the religious sentiments of their populations. Their

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<sup>5</sup> In the constitution of Medina formulated by Prophet Muhammad, Jewish tribes were given a special place. Article 30 particularly sets out religious tolerance between Jews and Muslims. There are also other narratives that show the positive state of relations between these two religious communities.

<sup>6</sup> One example is Quran, 2: 100–2.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 161.

support for the Palestinian cause was primarily couched in terms of backing their co-religionists in fighting for Jerusalem, one of the holy lands for Muslims. Within the Middle East, the motivations for establishing relations with Israel were the security threat posed by Iran and the potential economic benefits that could accrue from Israel's strong economic and technological base. However, normalising relations would risk being seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Therefore, a more cosmic reason was necessary to advance relations with Israel. Particularly, a rationale that would speak to the religious side of the matter.

“Normalising relations would risk being seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Therefore, a more cosmic reason was necessary to advance relations with Israel.”

The easing of anti-Israel views within the Muslim community required a narrative that counters the idea of the Jewish state and its people being enemies of Islam. Labelling the normalisation agreement the “Abraham Accords” and its consistent emphasis on the Abrahamic religions – referring to the shared origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and symbolising the unification of the three religions<sup>8</sup> – was a

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<sup>8</sup> Aaron W Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 141–144. The term “Abrahamic religions” is popularly used within the field of interfaith practice and academia, especially since the years following the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962–1965) and the September 11 attacks in the United States. However, it has been criticised as “meaningless” by academics such as Hughes, who argues that this is an untheorised term disguised as a historical reality. See also Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, “Prophet Abraham: A Figure of Exclusivism or Ecumenism?”, S. Rajaratnam School of International Relations, Occasional Papers in Interreligious Relations, No. 28, 1 March 2022), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/srp/interreligious-relations-irr-issue-28-prophet-abraham-a-figure-of-exclusivism-or-ecumenism-by-mohammed-gamal-abdelnour>. Abdelnour argues about the “usefulness of the category and its ability to enrich the commonalities of the three traditions without blurring the boundaries.”

tactful way of changing the perspective of Jews from enemies of Islam to people who shared kinship ties with Muslims by virtue of being descendants of Abraham, or Prophet Ibrahim in Islamic belief.<sup>9</sup> The treaty signed between Israel and the UAE spells out that “the Arab and Jewish peoples are *descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham* ... committed to a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> The accords emphasise IRD in the second paragraph of the declaration, preceding all other important factors essential for peace and stability in the region, suggesting that interfaith diplomacy is to be used to bridge the divide between Israel and the Arab countries.

“Labelling the normalisation agreement the “Abraham Accords” ... was a tactful way of changing the perspective of Jews from enemies of Islam to people who shared kinship ties with Muslims by virtue of being descendants of Abraham.”

The chances of the new narrative about Jewish people having effect, or at the very least not facing resistance, would require an environment that is receptive to IRD. In the case of the UAE, a series of steps had been taken for some years to build the state’s international image as “a stronghold of religious freedom, pluralism, and multiculturalism”.<sup>11</sup> For example, the government declared the year 2019

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<sup>9</sup> Abraham, who is known as Prophet Ibrahim in Islam, is believed to be one of the ancestors of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>10</sup> US State Department, “The Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations, and Full Normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel”, 15 September 2020.  
<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UAE-Israel-treaty-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ofir Winter and Yoel Guzansky, “Islam in the Service of Peace: Religious Aspects of the Abraham Accord”, INSS Insight, 6 September 2020,

as the “Year of Tolerance”. In February that year, in an unprecedented event, the UAE hosted Pope Francis, who signed the “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” document with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayyeb, witnessed by the UAE’s monarch.<sup>12</sup> The visit was followed by the building of a multi-faith complex in Abu Dhabi, the Abraham Family House, housing a mosque, church and synagogue.

The Abraham Accords seem to fit in nicely with these gestures. They are projected as part of a “reconciliatory spirit” and “marketed as a renewed religious rapprochement between Muslims, Jews and Christians”.<sup>13</sup> While the UAE’s high-profile interfaith activities may not have directly influenced the decision to label the normalisation agreement the Abraham Accords, they have clearly been relevant.<sup>14</sup> Will a similar strategy work for Indonesia’s policy towards Israel?

## Indonesia’s Position on Israel

Despite the Indonesian government’s restrictions on engaging in commerce with Israel, bilateral trade between Indonesia and Israel was reported to total about US\$100 million in 2018.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, there have been mentions of covert relations between the two countries over the years.<sup>16</sup> Yet the pressure of the conservative Muslim population

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<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-uae-deal-and-islam/>. (Winter & Guzansky, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> BBC, “Pope Francis arrives on historic visit to UAE,” 3 February 2019,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47106204>

<sup>13</sup> Winter & Guzansky, “Islam in the Service of Peace”.

<sup>14</sup> Hae Won Jeong, “The Abraham Accords and Religious Tolerance: Three Tales of Faith-Based Foreign-Policy Agenda Setting”, *Middle East Policy* 28, no. 1: 36–50, (2021)

<https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12540>.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Singh and Ehud Yaari, “How Does Indonesia View the Prospect of Normalization with Israel?”, *PolicyWatch* 3397, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 October 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-does-indonesia-view-prospect-normalization-israel>.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Barton and Colin Rubenstein, “Indonesia and Israel: A Relationship in Waiting”, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 17, no. 1/2 (2005): pp. 157–170, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/25834625>.

continues to be a hurdle for any shift in Indonesia's official policy on Israel. Outwardly, the world's largest Muslim country leans towards the pan-Islamic sentiment against the Jewish state, which is mixed with pro-Arab solidarity and post-colonial animus.<sup>17</sup> For Indonesia, this sentiment also comes with what Hadler refers to as "Malay" anti-Semitism.<sup>18</sup>

The most influential factor driving Indonesia's policy towards Israel is the potential backlash from the country's pious Muslims, for whom the future of Palestine is a concern. In fact, Palestine has been part of the discourse in Indonesia since as early as the 1920s, appearing as a regular topic of discussion among members of Muhammadiyah, the second largest mass-based Islamic organisation in the country, by virtue of their "feelings of affinity for Arabs and of Islamic solidarity".<sup>19</sup> In 1952, the Indonesian government expressed through the news agency Antara that it had no intention of recognising Israel as most of its population was Muslim.<sup>20</sup>

**"Palestine has been part of the discourse in Indonesia since as early as the 1920s."**

Over the years, there have been ample instances reflecting Indonesia's anti-Israel position. The most significant recent instance was when public objections to Israel's planned participation in the FIFA U-20 World Cup tournament that Indonesia was due to host from May to June 2023 led to the country losing its hosting rights. Indonesia's top Muslim clerical body, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), called on the

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<sup>17</sup> Moshe Yegar, "The Republic of Indonesia and Israel", *Israel Affairs*, 12, no. 1 (2006), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Hadler, "Translations of Antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and Violence in Colonial and Post-Colonial Indonesia", *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 94: 291–313, (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810500031012>.

<sup>19</sup> Barton & Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel", 159.

<sup>20</sup> Barton & Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel", 160–161.



government to explain the decision to allow the participation of the Israeli national football team.<sup>21</sup> In addition, more than 100 conservative Muslim demonstrators held a protest march in Jakarta in March 2023, orchestrated by a conservative alliance. Chanting “Allahu Akbar”, the demonstrators waved flags bearing the Islamic declaration of faith along with Palestinian flags. They also carried banners that called for Israel’s removal from the tournament and declared that Israel was the enemy of Islam.<sup>22</sup> In response to the uproar, Indonesia’s president, Joko Widodo, stressed that Israel’s participation in the tournament “has no relation to Indonesia’s consistent foreign policy stance on Palestine”.<sup>23</sup>

A survey ... conducted just after Israel lost the right to host the FIFA games ... [seemed to suggest that] the majority of Indonesians do not mix sports with politics.

Some key observations from this issue are useful to assess whether Indonesia’s policy on Israel can possibly shift. First, the government would have been aware that the Israeli team would be participating in the games and it is implausible that the government did not anticipate some sort of backlash from conservative Muslims. This would not have been the first instance of Israeli participation in a sports event in the country; at least three Israelis have participated in sports

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<sup>21</sup> Jakarta Post, “Muslim Groups Protest Israel’s Participation in FIFA U-20 Cup”, *The Jakarta Post*, 20 March 2023, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2023/03/20/muslim-groups-protest-israels-participation-in-fifa-u-20-cup.html>

<sup>22</sup> Andi Jatmiko, “Dozens in Indonesia Protest Israel’s Presence at U-20 Cup”, Yahoo! News, 20 March 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/dozens-indonesia-protest-israels-presence-095149026.html?ref=sp>

<sup>23</sup> Cabinet, Secretariat, Indonesia, “President Jokowi: Israel’s Participation in FIFA U-20 World Cup Has No Relation to Indonesia’s Political Stance on Palestine”, Cabinet Secretariat Indonesia, 28 March 2023, <https://Setkab.Go.Id/En/President-Jokowi-Israels-Participation-in-Fifa-u-20-World-Cup-Has-No-Relation-to-Indonesias-Political-Stance-on-Palestine/>,

events in Indonesia over the past several years.<sup>24</sup> Also, an Israeli parliamentary delegation attended an Inter-Parliamentary Union event in Bali in March 2022.<sup>25</sup>

“Strong objections [to Israel’s participation in the FIFA games] came mainly from two groups: one of Indonesia’s major political parties, PDI Perjuangan, and conservative Muslim groups.”

Second, a survey by Indonesia Political Indicator (IPI) conducted just after Israel lost the right to host the FIFA games found that over 60% of the respondents had no problem with an Israeli team playing on Indonesian soil.<sup>26</sup> This could be an indication that the majority of Indonesians do not mix sports with politics. Strong objections came mainly from two groups: one of Indonesia’s major political parties, PDI Perjuangan (PDIP), and conservative Muslim groups. The political party had expressed objection to Israel’s participation since August 2022.<sup>27</sup> Several prominent PDIP political figures explicitly objected to the Israeli team’s participation. A notable one among them was Ganjar Pranowo, who is one of the most electable candidates for the 2024 presidential

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<sup>24</sup> CNN Indonesia, “3 Atlet Israel Yang Tampil Di Indonesia Dalam 10 Tahun Terakhir”, CNN Indonesia, 27 March 2023,

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/olahraga/20230327142408-178-929870/3-atlet-israel-yang-tampil-di-indonesia-dalam-10-tahun-terakhir>.

<sup>25</sup> Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “PDI-P’s Own Goal? Controversy over Indonesia’s Loss as U-20 FIFA World Cup Host”, Fulcrum, 6 April 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/pdi-ps-own-goal-controversy-over-indonesias-loss-as-u-20-fifa-world-cup-host/>.

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Valentina Christa, “Most Indonesians Open-Minded about Israeli Football Team’s Arrival: Survey”, *Jakarta Globe*, 20 April 2023, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/most-indonesians-openminded-about-israeli-football-teams-arrival-survey%20>.

<sup>27</sup> CNN Indonesia, “PDIP: Penolakan ke Israel Suara Kemanusiaan, Bukan Politis”, 30 March 2023, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20230330123942-32-931272/pdip-penolakan-ke-israel-suara-kemanusiaan-bukan-politis>

election. Ganjar, currently governor of Central Java, first expressed his objection on 23 March 2023.<sup>28</sup>

“The silence [in previous instances of Israeli visits to Indonesia] makes it highly likely that the PDIP’s stand on Israel’s participation in the FIFA games was driven more by political considerations in view of the upcoming presidential election.”

PDIP claimed its objection was based on the party’s ideology and humanity, which lends towards the Palestine crisis. However, no such position was known to have been taken in earlier visits by Israelis to the country. The silence in those cases makes it highly likely that the PDIP’s stand on Israel’s participation in the FIFA games was driven more by political considerations in view of the upcoming presidential election. However, according to a public opinion poll, Ganjar’s electability, which had already been decreasing, dropped further, apparently because the public tied his vehement objection to Israel’s participation in the games to the cancellation of Indonesia’s hosting rights.<sup>29</sup> Ganjar’s stance has been criticised on social media, especially by football fans, who evidently were unhappy about the mixing of politics and sports. A national phone survey conducted in March 2023 with 1,213 respondents found that a majority of Indonesians would have wanted the games to be held in their country even if Israelis participated.<sup>30</sup> For them,

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<sup>28</sup> Detik.com, “Kronologi Ganjar Tolak Israel hingga Kini Kecewa Pildun U-20 Gagal di RI”, 30 March 2023, <https://www.detik.com/jateng/sepakbola/d-6646435/kronologi-ganjar-tolak-israel-hingga-kini-kecewa-pildun-u-20-batal-di-ri>

<sup>29</sup> Kompas, “Survei Litbang Kompas: Elektabilitas Ganjar Turun Imbas Tolak Timnas Israel di Piala Dunia U20”, 24 May 2023, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/05/24/05575291/survei-litbang-kompas-elektabilitas-ganjar-turun-imbasi-tolak-timnas-israel>

<sup>30</sup> Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “PDI-P’s Own Goal?”

hosting the game was evidently “a badge of pride for Indonesia”,<sup>31</sup> transcending the hatred against Israel.

## Prospects for Interfaith Diplomacy

The FIFA incident shows that politicking with an anti-Israel stance may not always garner public support. At the same time, it also hints at the need for Indonesia to focus on introducing IRD as a possible means of shifting perspectives on Jews, and eventually Israel.

Israel and Jews have been portrayed negatively in Indonesian public discourse, with a plethora of books and media echoing the same tone. Research in 2014 by the Anti-Defamation League, a US-based Jewish NGO, found in 2014 that 48% of the adult population of Indonesia harboured anti-Semitic attitudes.<sup>32</sup> More recently, a theology professor from the United States found through interviews with 500 high school and 700 university students across Indonesia in 2018 and 2019 that Jews were the third most hated people after LGBTI people and communists.<sup>33</sup> Hatred of Israel even led to objections when the local Jewish community in Minahasa district, North Sulawesi, established a Holocaust museum in January 2022. This was essentially a photo exhibition and its opening was attended by the governor of the province. MUI and the Islamic Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) protested the opening. The deputy chairman of MUI’s Advisory Board was said to have claimed the

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<sup>31</sup> Resty Woro Yunar, “Indonesia’s Jokowi ‘Sad’, Football Fans Angry as Fifa Pulls U20 World Cup over Israel’s Participation”, *South China Morning Post*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3215447/indonesias-jokowi-sad-football-fans-angry-fifa-pulls-u20-world-cup-over-israels-participation>; Chag De Guzman, “The Messy Politics and High Costs of Indonesia’s Anti-Israel FIFA Fiasco”, *Time*, 6 April 2023, <https://time.com/6269303/indonesia-fifa-u20-world-cup-impacts/>

<sup>32</sup> ADL, “Indonesia”, *The ADL GLOBAL 100: An Index of Antisemitism, 2014 – Indonesia*, <https://global100.adl.org/country/indonesia/2014>.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Barrett and Karuni Rompies, “Keeping the Faith, Quietly: Inside Muslim Indonesia’s Hidden Jewish Community”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/keeping-the-faith-quietly-inside-muslim-indonesia-s-hidden-jewish-community-20220203-p59tnv.html>.

museum could provoke outrage in local society and even to have called for it to be “razed to the ground”.<sup>34</sup>

Much of the anti-Semitism in Indonesia may be due to lack of encounters with Jews. The small Jewish communities scattered in Jakarta, Manado, Jayapura and elsewhere are estimated to number only 200.<sup>35</sup> The country has only one legally recognised synagogue, located in Tondano, North Sulawesi.

### “Much of the anti-Semitism in Indonesia may be due to lack of encounters with Jews.”

The solution to the lack of encounters with local Jews could be to create closer affinity between Indonesia’s Muslim population and the worldwide Jewish community. The 1000 Abrahamic Circles Project started by Dr Dino Patti Djalal, a former Indonesian ambassador to the United States, is one entity that has already undertaken initiatives of this nature. The genesis of the project was an “Abrahamic peace mission” in 2012 to get Muslim and Christian religious leaders from Indonesia to travel to the United States to engage with representatives from the three Abrahamic religions. That encounter was said to have led to an influential conservative Islamic cleric from West Java meeting a rabbi and eventually dropping anti-Semitic content from his sermons.<sup>36</sup> The group continues to organise events where Indonesian Muslim and Christian religious leaders are able to engage with foreign Jewish leaders. Such encounters, which are effectively a form of track 1.5 diplomacy, could serve in the long run to lessen the hostility towards Jews among

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<sup>34</sup> US State Department, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Indonesia”, 15 May 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/indonesia/>.

<sup>35</sup> US State Department, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Indonesia”.

<sup>36</sup> Website of 1000 Abrahamic Circles Project, “Our Story”, 2023, <https://www.1000circles.com/ourstory>

Indonesian Muslims even if they do not necessarily lead to normalisation with Israel.

“In facilitating dialogue between Indonesian Muslim leaders and Jewish leaders overseas, Singapore provides an opportunity nearer home, given its small Jewish community, which has 200 years of history.”

In facilitating dialogue between Indonesian Muslim leaders and Jewish leaders overseas, Singapore provides an opportunity nearer home, given its small Jewish community, which has 200 years of history.<sup>37</sup> The Iraqi ancestry of Singapore’s Jews could be a cultural bridge that appeals to the Arabic traditions of the Muslim community in Indonesia. Jewish leaders in Singapore have been among Singapore’s interfaith leadership, sharing friendships with Muslim leaders through their participation in Singapore’s Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO).<sup>38</sup> The chief rabbi of Singapore was one of the speakers at the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace in 2019.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, during an international conference organised by Singapore in 2022,<sup>40</sup> Indonesian delegates, along with others, visited a synagogue in Singapore and met with Jewish

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<sup>37</sup> Singapore Jews website, “History”, reproduced from Mattia Tomba, eds., *Beating the Odds: 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties*, Middle East Institute, November 2019, <https://singaporejews.com/history-2/>, 2023

<sup>38</sup> The Singapore Jewish community was one of the founding members of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore. Rabbi Jacob Shababo was elected president of the then Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru in September 1950. Vina Jie-Min Prasad and Jaime Koh, “Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore”, *Singapore Infopedia*, 9 December 2014, [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2014-12-09\\_125938.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-12-09_125938.html)

<sup>39</sup> Faisal Assegaf, “Pemimpin rabbi Singapura kunjungi kelas bahasa Ibrani di Jakarta”, *Albalad.co*, 10 July 2019, <https://albalad.co/kabar/2019A9065/pemimpin-rabbi-singapura-kunjungi-kelas-bahasa-ibrani-di-jakarta/>

<sup>40</sup> The International Conference of Cohesive Societies (ICCS), “Community Explorations”, <https://www.iccs.sg/community-experience/communityexplorations/>

leaders. Such interfaith interactions in Indonesia's immediate neighbourhood could serve as a positive example of Jewish-Muslim relations. It is an alternative narrative to the hostility towards Jewish people prevalent in Indonesia.

**“The Islamic mass organisation Nahdlatul Ulama, which has long had a more tolerant view of Israel, is an important player in developing and sustaining the country's interfaith diplomacy.”**

The Islamic mass organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has long had a more tolerant view of Israel, is an important player in developing and sustaining the country's interfaith diplomacy. The late Abdurrahman Wahid, NU's leader at one time who later became the country's president, visited Israel several times in the 1990s. In 2018, NU's secretary general, Yahya Staquf, visited Israel and met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The visit was criticised in Indonesia and prompted some protests.<sup>41</sup> Yahya held that his visit was aimed at promoting the Palestinian cause. He was reported as having called for compassion between Jews and Muslims, which, according to him, could lead the way for Israel to establish relations with Muslim countries around the world.<sup>42</sup> Yahya has been keen to profile NU internationally as a proponent of moderate Islam by promoting the concept of Islam Nusantara, and its derivative, “humanitarian Islam”. As NU leader, he was also instrumental in organising an interfaith summit in Bali in November 2022, just before Indonesia hosted the G20 summit.<sup>43</sup> On the

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<sup>41</sup> AP, “Netanyahu Unexpectedly Meets with Indonesian Muslim Leader”, *The Times of Israel*, 15 June 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-unexpectedly-meets-with-indonesian-muslim-leader/>.

<sup>42</sup> AP, “Netanyahu Unexpectedly Meets with Indonesian Muslim Leader”.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Raymond Arifianto, “Towards ‘Humanitarian Islam’: New Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman and the Global Initiative to Promote Religious Moderation”, IDSS Paper no. 3

U-20 World Cup issue, Yahya supported the idea of the Israeli team participating in Indonesia, saying he believed Israel's participation would not harm Palestinians.<sup>44</sup> Such advocacy by NU, Indonesia's largest Islamic mass organisation, augurs well for Israel-Indonesia relations.

**“Indonesian Jews in fact represent an untapped area of interfaith diplomacy.”**

It is noteworthy that Yahya's visit to Israel was at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), which has been engaged in interfaith diplomacy in Indonesia for the past few years. In July 2022, AJC officials undertook an “unprecedented visit”<sup>45</sup> to Indonesia and met with government officials and delegates. Their mission was to “promote interfaith cooperation and advance deeper understanding of Judaism and the Jewish people” as well as “explor[e] prospects for warming relations between Indonesia and the State of Israel”.<sup>46</sup> The mission included a Shabbat dinner for religious leaders, scholars and interfaith activists from Indonesia. Earlier, in May 2020, the group hosted a Facebook live session with Jusuf Kalla, former vice president of Indonesia, to discuss the challenges and opportunities for Indonesia to establish diplomatic

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(26 January 2022), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip22003-towards-humanitarian-islam-new-nahdlatul-ulama-chairman-and-the-global-initiative-to-promote-religious-moderation/>.

<sup>44</sup> Niruban Balachandran, “Why Indonesia Should Open Diplomatic Relations with Israel”, *The Jakarta Post*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/04/04/why-indonesia-should-open-diplomatic-relations-with-israel.html>.

<sup>45</sup> American Jewish Committee (AJC), “American Jewish Committee Advances Interreligious Understanding in Unprecedented Visit to Indonesia,” 28 July 2022, <https://www.ajc.org/news/american-jewish-committee-advances-interreligious-understanding-in-unprecedented-visit-to>

<sup>46</sup> AJC, “American Jewish Committee Advances Interreligious Understanding in Unprecedented Visit to Indonesia”.



ties with Israel.<sup>47</sup> Most recently, in May 2023, a member of AJC was involved in various IRD dialogues in Indonesia, including a public lecture at the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) that covered the similarities between Islam and Judaism.<sup>48</sup>

“The exclusion of Judaism as an officially recognised religion in Indonesia and the need for Jews to identify themselves in their official identification documents as adherents of any of the recognised religions also is a deterrent [against their participation in meaningful interfaith dialogue].”

AJC also engages with Indonesians who identify as Jewish people.<sup>49</sup> Indonesian Jews in fact represent an untapped area of interfaith diplomacy. They could better bridge the gap between Israelis and Indonesians than foreign groups like AJC. Members of the local Jewish community will be more relatable at the grassroots level because they speak the local language and have some cultural affinity with Muslim Indonesians. The aforementioned synagogue in Tondano has been the site of some IRD among Muslims, Jews and Christians in that area.

However, it is not just the anti-Semitism prevalent in the country that has made it hard for local Jewish communities to engage in

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<sup>47</sup> AJC, “A Conversation with H.E. Jusuf Kalla, Vice President of Indonesia (2004–2009) (2014–2019)”, AJC Facebook page, 27 May 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/AJCGlobal/videos/533587197307889/>.

<sup>48</sup> Safiullah Junejo and Kante Hamed, “UIII Discusses Muslims and Non-Muslims Relationship in History”, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, 8 May 2023, <https://www.uiii.ac.id/news/57345/uiii-discusses-muslims-and-non-muslims-relationship-in-history>.

<sup>49</sup> The authors have engaged with this community of Indonesians, who identify as Jewish either through conversion or because of their ancestral links to Dutch Jews who came to Indonesia.

meaningful interfaith relations with the Muslim majority. The exclusion of Judaism as an officially recognised religion in Indonesia and the need for Jews to identify themselves in their official identification documents as adherents of any of the recognised religions also is a deterrent.<sup>50</sup> The biggest challenge for the government in advancing interfaith dialogue thus will be creating safe spaces where people of different religions feel confident to speak about their beliefs even if their religions are not officially recognised. The Indonesian government must first invest in soft power tactics to promote a culture of openness to interfaith diplomacy.

**“A shift in attitude towards Israel on the part of Saudi Arabia could affect sentiments among some sections of Indonesia’s increasingly conservative Muslim population.”**

In the mix of opportunities for Israel-Indonesia relations is the potential for a shift in policy towards Israel on the part of Saudi Arabia, considered to be the epicentre of Islam, with its king being custodian of the two holy mosques in Islam (i.e., the mosques in Mecca and Medina). It is well known that funds from Saudi Arabia have been received by religious institutions in Indonesia.<sup>51</sup> A shift in attitude towards Israel on the part of Saudi Arabia could affect sentiments among some sections of Indonesia’s increasingly conservative Muslim population. But

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<sup>50</sup> 1. Chris Barrett and Karuni Rompies, “Keeping the Faith, Quietly: Inside Muslim Indonesia’s Hidden Jewish Community”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/keeping-the-faith-quietly-inside-muslim-indonesia-s-hidden-jewish-community-20220203-p59tnv.html>; Ahmad, “Gunakan KTP Kristen, Komunitas Yahudi Indonesia Mengaku Lebih Aman”, Hidayatullah.com, 30 April 2017, <https://hidayatullah.com/berita/nasional/2017/04/30/115795/gunakan-ktp-kristen-komunitas-yahudi-indonesia-mengaku-lebih-aman.html>

<sup>51</sup> Gökçe Şencan et al., “Indonesia and the Middle East: Exploring Connections”, Middle East Institute, 19 December 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indonesia-and-middle-east-exploring-connections>.

normalisation of Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel would require a peace initiative that provides a solution for the Israeli-Palestine conflict, a prospect that seems unlikely for some time.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Indonesia does not have the security considerations that served as motivation for the Arab states to seek normalisation with Israel, that is, the concerns they share with Israel about the growing threat from Iran.<sup>53</sup> However, ties with Israel could have significant economic benefits and could boost Indonesia's technology base, given Israel's leadership in this area. Indonesia could also derive benefits in the health sector and in agricultural technology. The UAE has already seen economic payoffs since the signing of the Abraham Accords. In 2021, trade between Israel and the UAE reached about US\$1.154 billion, a hefty amount considering that official ties were established only in September 2020.<sup>54</sup>

However, Indonesia's sociopolitical constraints remain an impediment to establishing official ties. Unlike countries in the Middle East, which are led by strong monarchies that dominate policymaking, Indonesian policymakers need to be wary of the domestic political consequences of broaching friendly ties with Israel as long as the Palestinian conflict continues to fester.

In pursuing interfaith diplomacy, it must be remembered that the Indonesian public tends to regard the country's anti-Israeli stance as an expression of solidarity with Palestine. While the Abraham Accords

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<sup>52</sup> Tovah Lazaroff, "Israel-Saudi Peace Can solve Palestinian conflict, Netanyahu says," *Jerusalem Post*, 15 December 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-725011>

<sup>53</sup> Dennis Ross, "The Abraham Accords and The Changing Shape of the Middle East", The Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 21 June 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/abraham-accords-and-changing-shape-middle-east>

<sup>54</sup> Mohamed Maher, "Two Years On, The Abraham Accords Bear Fruit", Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 October 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-years-abraham-accords-bear-fruit>

offer a sound model for Indonesia, their promises of “strengthening peace in the Middle East” remain to be tested.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, just recently, in May 2023, the conflict in Gaza flared up again, with rockets being fired into Israel by Palestinians and Israelis conducting air strikes on the strip. Therefore, the Indonesian government must ensure that expectations are managed so that pursuit of IRD is not seen among Indonesians as compromising their solidarity with Palestinians. ◆

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<sup>55</sup> US State Department, “The Abraham Accords – Declaration”.

# Israel's Public Diplomacy

## Will It Touch a New Generation of Singaporeans?

Jasmine Ashley Kolano\*

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Israeli public diplomacy has traditionally relied on military exchanges to strengthen ties with Singapore. Israel's recent influence efforts include cultural and religious diplomacy aimed at young Singaporeans. However, the effectiveness of these efforts in disseminating Israel's strategic narrative and advancing its soft power is in question owing to the lack of long-term investment in public diplomacy and the lingering Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite these constraints, Israel needs to implement a sharper public diplomacy strategy to tell its story to a new generation of Singaporeans unfamiliar with Israel's contributions to Singapore in its early days of independence.

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A little known fact about Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, is the impact that the novel *Exodus* – a fictional account of the founding of modern Israel – had on him as a young man: “The story left a deep impression on me.”<sup>1</sup> The prime minister admits that his admiration of Israel can be traced, in part, to the narratives of remarkable resilience and innovation that he had first read about in Leon Uris's bestseller. Prime Minister Lee's Singapore continues to maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Wai, “Israel's story ‘resonates with, inspires S'poreans’”, *Today Online*, 29 April 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/israels-story-resonates-inspires-sporeans>.

the close relationship with Israel forged since the island republic's independence. The projected opening of a Singapore embassy in Israel, announced in 2022, marks a watershed moment in their 53 years of diplomatic relations.

In many ways, Prime Minister Lee's encounter with *Exodus* – a book that “put Israel on the map in a positive light” according to Israeli officials<sup>2</sup> – is the kind of benchmark that would mark the success of Israel's public diplomacy programmes around the world: gaining prominence with up-and-coming decision-makers in order to “change the course of [their] attitudes toward Israel for the rest of their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

“Prime Minister Lee's encounter with *Exodus* – a book that ‘put Israel on the map in a positive light’ – is the kind of benchmark that would mark the success of Israel's public diplomacy programmes around the world.”

Public diplomacy, a state's efforts to advance its foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics, is a critical tool employed by the state of Israel to normalise relations with other states and establish its *raison d'être* – its right to exist.<sup>4</sup> Public diplomacy is a critical tool in developing soft power, what Joseph S. Nye describes as attraction towards a state's immaterial assets – its values, culture and policies.<sup>5</sup> Soft

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<sup>2</sup> Ron Schleifer and Jessica Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel* (Chicago, IL: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Fatemeh Shafiee Sarvestani, Saied Reza Ameli, and Foad Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States: A Network and Narrative Approach”, *Asian Journal of Communication* 29, no. 2 (December 2018): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2018.1531898>.

<sup>4</sup> Eytan Gilboa, “Public Diplomacy: The Missing Component in Israel's Foreign Policy”, *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 4 (October 2006): 715. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310600890006>.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94–109.

power can be cultivated when states communicate “authentic, compelling and attractive” narratives in strategic ways to key audiences.<sup>6</sup>

## Soft Power Through Military Exchanges

The beginning of the bilateral relationship between Singapore and Israel was a “fortuitous”<sup>7</sup> development – Israel happened to be the only nation to respond to Singapore’s call for assistance in building its new army in 1965. By 1967, Singapore’s first officer cadets had been commissioned upon completing courses conducted by advisers from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF),<sup>8</sup> while more than 9,000 young Singaporean National Service conscripts were enlisted, also upon training by the Israelis.<sup>9</sup>

Israel’s legacy as an invaluable friend whose assistance came at the height of Singapore’s vulnerability lives on among Singaporeans, who credit the beginnings of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) – currently the best equipped army in Southeast Asia – to Israel’s “act of faith” and “empathy” towards the burgeoning city-state.<sup>10</sup> Singapore supports a two-states solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, consistent with relevant UN Security Council resolutions, but continues to maintain close and friendly relations with Israel. Despite Israel’s faltering image abroad over the Palestinian issue, Singapore has hosted Israeli leaders such as then Israeli President Chaim Herzog, whose visit in 1986 drew

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<sup>6</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”, 195.

<sup>7</sup> Chong Guan Kwa, “Growing in Strength: Responding to National and Regional Realities”, in *Giving Strength to Our Nation: The SAF and Its People*, eds. Eck Kheng Goh and Judith D’Silva (Singapore: Ministry of Defence, 2015), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Ho, “A Mexican Fandango with a Poisonous Shrimp”, in *Beating the Odds Together: 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties*, ed. Mattia Tomba (Singapore: Middle East Institute, NUS, and World Scientific Publishing Co., 2020), 40.

<sup>9</sup> “Implementation of National Service”, ROOTS, July 10, 2022, <https://www.roots.gov.sg/stories-landing/stories/implementation-of-national-service/story>.

<sup>10</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “Singapore: Israel in Southeast Asia”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 3.

public protests in Singapore's neighbouring countries.<sup>11</sup> Such interactions demonstrate the resilience of Israel-Singapore ties.<sup>12</sup>

**“Paramount to the resilience of Israel-Singapore ties is Israel’s relationship-building efforts with individuals of influence, namely public sector professionals, through exchanges.”**

Paramount to this resilience is Israel's relationship-building efforts with individuals of influence, namely public sector professionals, through exchanges.<sup>13</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, a pioneering scholar of public diplomacy, calls such exchanges “the soul of public diplomacy” because of its ability to form a valuable communication network.<sup>14</sup> This network provides Israel with the credibility that it needs to continue effective public engagement with Singaporeans, even after the exchange has expired. Internationally acclaimed architect Moshe Safdie, designer of Singapore's Marina Bay Sands hotel and Changi Airport's Jewel complex, maintains that his Israeli identity “opened doors” for his design work in Singapore due to the Singaporean public's familiarity with Israel during their “military service visits” and/or business and leisure excursions, attesting to the power of citizen-to-citizen exchanges in meeting Israel's public diplomacy goals.<sup>15</sup>

George Yeo, Singapore's minister for foreign affairs from 2004 to 2011, was appointed to visit key sites in Israel and an Israeli Air Force

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<sup>11</sup> Winston Choo, “A Special Relationship that Continues to Grow,” in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Choo, “A Special Relationship that Continues to Grow”, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”. 192.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Safdie, “The Story of Israeli Architecture in Singapore”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 96.



base in his younger years as a new Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) captain. Subsequently, Yeo frequented Israel and received professional mentorship by Israeli Air Force Commander David Ivry and Colonel Yaakov Gal. When Yeo became a cabinet minister, he “endeavoured to foster close ties with Israel” and coordinate closer Israeli-Palestinian collaborations.<sup>16</sup> Yeo writes about his experience:

I developed a healthy respect for the IDF and learned much from their successes and setbacks. Some of their experiences were profoundly relevant to us... I became an ardent student of the history and condition of Israel and the Jewish people... Through [Yaakov], David Ivry and others, I had a sense of the intensity of daily life in Israel. ... So many personal friendships now bind our two countries together.<sup>17</sup>

Yeo's testimony is a key example of how professional exchanges fostered positive views of Israel among Singapore's decision-makers. This hallmark of Israeli public diplomacy, or *hasbara* (“explaining”) in Hebrew, has extended into growing science and technological exchanges as well.<sup>18</sup> By orienting its public diplomacy initiatives towards skills-sharing and technological progress, Israel capitalises on shared values of innovation and development with Singapore's public and private actors, further cementing bilateral ties. Since 1997, approximately 2,250 Israeli and Singaporean researchers and engineers have participated in Singapore-Israel Industrial Research & Development Foundation (SIIRD) projects, bearing witness to the growing professional links between the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George Yeo, “Reflections on Singapore-Israel Relations”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Yeo, “Reflections on Singapore-Israel Relations”, 29–32.

<sup>18</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Simona Halperin, “Celebrating the Israel-Singapore Golden Jubilee: Working Towards Continued Partnership”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 20.

## Harnessing Cultural and Religious Diplomacy

Nonetheless, critics of Israeli public diplomacy suggest that Israel's *hasbara* messaging has not fully penetrated important groups, particularly younger audiences, who have grown more critical of Israel in light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>20</sup> While the sentiments of young Singaporeans towards the Israel-Palestine issue have not been sufficiently studied, online discourse shows the conflict holds emotional resonance with Singapore's Christian and Muslim populations.<sup>21</sup>

Online archival sources dated from 2013 demonstrate that Israeli public diplomacy efforts in the last 10 years have targeted Singaporean youth in both secular and religious communities, intending to promote positive Israeli narratives. The following section examines three key initiatives by the Israeli embassy in Singapore and their potential for fostering long-term relationships of mutual understanding.

### (A) *Tikkun Olam* – Israel's Youth-Oriented Cultural Diplomacy

In June 2019, the Israeli embassy in Singapore partnered with the Tikkun Olam Makers (TOM), a global nonprofit organisation launched in Israel in 2014, to hold the first TOM “MakeAthon” in Singapore. The event was intended to mark 50 years of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Israel. *Tikkun olam*, the Hebrew phrase for “repairing the world”, harkens back to a virtue in Judaism that calls on human beings “to enhance the lives of others, to fight injustice, to utilise [their] talents and ability to serve humanity, and to be creators and not destroyers.”<sup>22</sup>

The TOM MakeAthon event brought together eight competitive teams of 70 Israeli and Singaporean volunteers to produce innovative tech solutions for individuals with disability. Students from Singapore's

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<sup>20</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Faizah Zakaria, “Gaza through Diverse Singaporean Eyes”, Academia.sg, 11 June 2021, <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/gaza-through-diverse-singaporean-eyes/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Pierre Fettmann, “The Jewish Practice of Tikkun Olam and Interfaith Relations in Singapore”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 67.

Temasek Polytechnic won the top three prizes.<sup>23</sup> All design blueprints – including a mobile application to ensure safer, easier commutes for people with Down's syndrome – were made available online for free so that the technology could be readily accessible to those needing it most.<sup>24</sup>

In seeking to depict the convergence of Singaporean and Israeli values – building an “egalitarian society... [with] equal access to education, welfare, and human dignity”<sup>25</sup> – the event shed positive light on Israel's image as it continues to face accusations of human rights abuses. The event, opened by Singapore's second minister for education, received some coverage in the Singapore and Israeli media.<sup>26</sup> Despite the event's success, however, no announcement has been made to build on that success through a second MakeAthon, conceivably because of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Without adequate follow-up, the impact of this cultural exchange is limited to the participants.

## **(B) *Colours of the Bible* - Youth-Oriented Religious Diplomacy**

Jointly organised by the Bible Society of Singapore and the Israeli embassy in Singapore, the *Colours of the Bible* art competition and exhibition was inaugurated in 2014 and has been held annually since then. The objective of the event is “to celebrate the beauty, culture and

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<sup>23</sup> “Tikkun Olam Makers (TOM) MakeAthon: GEM Winners,” Temasek Polytechnic, 17 October 2019, <https://www.tp.edu.sg/about-tp/media-centre/campus-news/tikkun-olam-makers-tom-makeathon-gem-winners.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Simona Halperin, “Celebrating the Israel-Singapore Golden Jubilee”, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Fettmann, “The Jewish Practice of Tikkun Olam”, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Wai Yee Yip, “Cooking Blind with Talking Tech”, *The Straits Times*, 26 June 2019, [https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/cooking-blind-with-talking-tech?fbclid=IwAR1j1-](https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/cooking-blind-with-talking-tech?fbclid=IwAR1j1-ZNvanHwB4hjhrdPVnNv_aI_DzFLCmtFlGrc7AjaoDKccVQ0kQSnlw)

[ZNvanHwB4hjhrdPVnNv\\_aI\\_DzFLCmtFlGrc7AjaoDKccVQ0kQSnlw](https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/cooking-blind-with-talking-tech?fbclid=IwAR1j1-ZNvanHwB4hjhrdPVnNv_aI_DzFLCmtFlGrc7AjaoDKccVQ0kQSnlw); “Repairing the world reaches Singapore”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 June 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/repairing-the-world-reaches-singapore-592591>.

history of the Bible and the land of Israel”; the wider aim is to project Israel as being central to the Biblical narrative.<sup>27</sup>

Nearly all the contest categories are for young people aged 18 and below. The current Israeli ambassador, Sagi Karni, celebrates the contest as one of the longest-running Israel-Singapore diplomacy initiatives that “engage young people and children”.<sup>28</sup> Initially geared towards Singaporean and Israeli contestants, it has since been opened to contestants from around the world and serves to bridge Christian and Jewish communities through shared Biblical values. Although the contest has a substantial Facebook following and is a conduit for vibrant Singaporean-Israeli exchanges, the participants are mainly Singaporean youth, given the small Israeli community in Singapore.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, they are given little to no opportunity to hear Israeli narratives before, during, or after the contest, suggesting that the initiative may only produce a low-public diplomacy impact.

### **(C) *Iftar* – Another Youth-Oriented Religious Diplomacy Effort**

In 2015, Israel’s then ambassador to Singapore, Yael Rubinstein, hosted Muslim students from Singaporean universities to a Ramadan *iftar* (breaking-of-fast) dinner attended by prominent members of Singapore’s Muslim and Jewish communities, including an imam and a rabbi.<sup>30</sup> Rubinstein talked about the rising prominence of the Arab community and the Arabic language in Israel while elucidating on links between

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<sup>27</sup> “Colours of the Bible”, Colours of the Bible, accessed 1 February 2023, <https://coloursofthebible.org/about/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Colours of the Bible Exhibition 2021 with the Embassy of Israel”, The Bible Society of Singapore, 13 October 2021, Facebook video, 2:04, <https://fb.watch/ipTTK9ayOS/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Colours of the Bible,” Facebook page, accessed 2 May 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/coloursofthebible>.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Sim, “Embassy of Israel in Singapore hosted breaking-of-fast dinner with Muslim community”, *The Straits Times*, 16 July 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/embassy-of-israel-in-singapore-hosted-breaking-of-fast-dinner-with-muslim-community>.

Judaism and Islam.<sup>31</sup> Given the high value placed on multiculturalism and plurality in Singapore, the event made headlines. More importantly, it gave Israel the unique opportunity to cultivate friendships with a constituency that has deep concerns about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>32</sup>

A second interfaith *iftar* co-hosted in 2019 by Singapore's Jewish Welfare Board, the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), and a local youth-driven interfaith group was held at former Israeli ambassador Simona Halperin's residence in Singapore.<sup>33</sup> No outreach to Muslim students by the Israeli embassy has been reported since then, conceivably another victim of the pandemic's safe distancing measures.

## Need for Long-term Investment in Youth Diplomacy

Currently, the Israel Film Festival is the most notable cultural diplomacy initiative conducted by the Israeli embassy in Singapore. "Carefully selected feature films" are showcased annually to "tell stories of a vibrant, conflicted, modern [Israeli] society that is relatable to the audience in Singapore."<sup>34</sup> However, most of the attendees may be individuals already won over to Israel's cause. Moreover, while films can inspire audiences and promote more attractive Israeli narratives, they constitute one-way communication, which fosters only limited audience engagement. Thus, public diplomacy initiatives that promote Israel's arts and culture alone cannot address "the real problem of Israel's reception

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Sim, "Embassy of Israel in Singapore hosted breaking-of-fast dinner with Muslim community."

<sup>32</sup> "PM Lee Hsien Loong responds to Pergas letter on Israeli-Palestinian conflict", *The Straits Times*, 24 February 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/pm-lee-hsien-loong-responds-to-pergas-letter-on-israeli-palestinian-conflict>.

<sup>33</sup> "Interfaith Iftar hosted at Singapore's Jewish Community Centre", The Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore, 3 June 2019, <https://iro.sg/press-release/interfaith-iftar-hosted-at-singapores-jewish-community-centre/>.

<sup>34</sup> Halperin, "Celebrating the Israel-Singapore Golden Jubilee", 21.

in the world”, according to Moshe Yegar, who was formerly in charge of the *hasbara* department of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>35</sup>

“Films can inspire audiences and promote more attractive Israeli narratives, but they constitute one-way communication, which fosters only limited audience engagement.”

The importance of Israel's youth public diplomacy initiatives cannot be overstated. In 2021, a young Singaporean Muslim attempted to attack three Jews at a synagogue in Singapore, stirred by narratives he had consumed regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is evident from this incident that amid an information vacuum, young people who are exposed to extremist religious and geopolitical ideologies could be prone to making dangerous judgement calls.<sup>36</sup> There is a willingness, however, on the part of some Singaporean youths to listen to alternative narratives: Goh Ker Liang, a student from the National University of Singapore (NUS) studied entrepreneurship in Israel because of his “personal interest” in the Middle East region; Eunice Lee from the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) interned in Israel despite hearing about the tensions between the Palestinians and Israelis.<sup>37</sup> Goh and Lee are among an increasing trend of young Singaporeans studying

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<sup>35</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Luca Farrow, “Islamophobia and Antisemitism in SG: Narratives of Grievance”, RSIS Commentary No. 057, 7 April 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/islamophobia-and-antisemitism-in-sg-narratives-of-grievance/#.ZFNC43ZBxRY>

<sup>37</sup> “Pick a Pier Featured in the Straits Times, Singapore's Most Popular Newspaper”, Pick a Pier, 6 February 2020, <https://company.pickapier.com/post/pick-a-pier-featured-in-the-straits-times-singapore-s-most-popular-newspaper/>.

and interning in Israel.<sup>38</sup> Both are examples of Singaporean youths who are part of the “soft middle” – individuals curious about exploring Israeli narratives and open to the effect that an experience with Israel could have on their lives.

**“Public diplomacy programmes geared towards youths are most influential because of the wide information networks that students possess and their potential to be future leaders.”**

As Etyan Gilboa, Israeli expert on public diplomacy, suggests, “Asia should ... be targeted for intensive PD [public diplomacy] programmes, because Asian nations [are likely to] have much more influence on the world stage in the future.”<sup>39</sup> Israel now faces “the largest cohort of ASEAN youth in history”, with 34 per cent of ASEAN’s population comprising young people aged 15–34 years,<sup>40</sup> a good number of whom further their studies alongside Singaporeans in Singapore’s educational institutions.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “More Singapore students heading to Israel to learn about technology, start-ups”, Channel News Asia, 17 December 2019, news feature, 3:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7OWgg75sm8>.

<sup>39</sup> Etyan Gilboa, “Public Diplomacy: The Missing Component in Israel’s Foreign Policy”, *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 4 (October 2006): 743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310600890067>.

<sup>40</sup> Arizza Ann Nocum, “ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary – “Same but Different” ... and Better for It: A More Cohesive ASEAN Built on Youth Leadership”, RSIS Commentary No. 109, 3 November 2022, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CO22109.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> There were approximately 2,000 students from Southeast Asia studying at the National University of Singapore in the fourth quarter of 2022. See: “Speech by Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies Heng Swee Keat at The Times Higher Education Campus Live Southeast Asia 2022 on 7 December 2022”, Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 7 December 2022,

While research suggests that public diplomacy programmes geared towards youths are most influential because of the wide information networks that students possess and their potential to be future leaders,<sup>42</sup> Israel has traditionally left the delivery of youth exchange programmes to universities or partner organisations. This may be part of Israel's grander strategy to avoid exercising a heavy government hand in public diplomacy initiatives due to associations with negative World War II propaganda.<sup>43</sup> As Nye acutely points out, "postmodern publics are generally sceptical of authority.... Thus, it often behoves governments to keep in the background and to work with private actors."<sup>44</sup>

**“Israel must overcome traditional barriers to public diplomacy, which include budget constraints and a lack of faith in the ‘tangible results’ of cultural diplomacy.”**

However, public diplomacy initiatives driven by the private sector are subject to the budgets and agendas of their governing bodies, which can result in the intermittent nature of such programmes. Furthermore, they may be conducted by “untrained spokespersons”, adding to the multiplicity of Israel's advocacy messaging.<sup>45</sup>

Israel must therefore overcome traditional barriers to public diplomacy, which include budget constraints and a lack of faith in the

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<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/DPM-Heng-Swee-Keat-at-The-Times-Higher-Education-Campus-Live-Southeast-Asia-2022>.

<sup>42</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”, 192.

<sup>43</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ilan Manor, “Israeli Public Diplomacy: Between Fusion and Confusion”, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 26 January 2015, blog,

<https://usepublicdiplomacy.org/blog/israeli-public-diplomacy-between-fusion-and-confusion>.



“tangible results” of cultural diplomacy”,<sup>46</sup> to develop a long-term strategic plan to nurture its civil society resources that can help to productively engage young Singaporeans. It must also recognise that expecting quick or tangible benefits from relationship-building programmes is often unrealistic. At the same time, it should capitalise on new digital technologies, such as AI and virtual exchange programmes, to cut down on the time – and the costs – traditionally required to connect with new audiences.<sup>47</sup>

“The day will come when a new generation of Singaporeans will no longer be familiar with Israel’s rich contributions to a pioneering Singapore, and fresh friendships with the state of Israel would need to be forged.”

The three public diplomacy initiatives discussed in this paper – TOM MakeAthon, *Colours of the Bible* art competition and *iftar* dinner gatherings – involved public–private partnerships between the Israeli embassy in Singapore and nongovernmental entities, and they were a good start. More sustained efforts of this nature are needed to redress Israel’s public image and educate Singaporean youth on the complex narratives surrounding Israel’s nationhood and experience with antisemitism. Singapore’s unique, multicultural context and burgeoning

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<sup>46</sup> Ronit Appel, Irony Assaf, Steven Schmerz, and Ayela Zi, “Cultural Diplomacy: An Important but Neglected Tool in Promoting Israel’s Public Image”, *The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya* (May 2008) 41,

[https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/cultural\\_diplomacy/Cultural\\_Diplomacy\\_-\\_Ronit\\_Appel,\\_Assaf\\_Irony,\\_Steven\\_Schmerz,\\_Ayela\\_Ziv.pdf](https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/cultural_diplomacy/Cultural_Diplomacy_-_Ronit_Appel,_Assaf_Irony,_Steven_Schmerz,_Ayela_Ziv.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is already heading in this direction with the 2022 launch of a new Digital Diplomacy unit headed by Israeli Ambassador David Saranga. See: “The next frontier: Israel taps AI and metaverse for aid in digital diplomacy”, *The Times of Israel*, 26 March 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-next-frontier-israel-taps-ai-and-metaverse-for-aid-in-digital-diplomacy/>.

interfaith efforts, in particular, create new opportunities for Israel to engage young Singaporeans in genuine two-way discussions that can help to promote mutual understanding and tolerance.

The day will come when a new generation of Singaporeans will no longer be familiar with Israel's rich contributions to a pioneering Singapore, and fresh friendships with the state of Israel would need to be forged. Without a long-term strategic plan or adequate financial commitment towards youth diplomacy, Israel's network expansion may stagnate or grow only among the converted.<sup>48</sup> A consistent and centrally coordinated Israeli public diplomacy strategy based on robust exchanges can facilitate the process of genuine dialogue and memorable trust-building with young Singaporeans. Such activities may help to reframe Israel from being the "perennial problem" of the Middle East to a potential partner of Southeast Asia.<sup>49</sup> ◆

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<sup>48</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, "Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States", 193.

<sup>49</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 33.



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