



## Adapting to New Realities

Israeli foreign policy in post-Netanyahu times

MEDITERRANEAN PROGRAMME

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October 2022

Policy Paper #114/2022

# Adapting to New Realities: Israeli foreign policy in post-Netanyahu times

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### Summary

- Israel had to adapt to the revised objectives of the Biden administration in the Middle East and to update its coordination with Russia on the Syria front.
- The war in Ukraine has reconfigured Israel's relations with the US and Russia.
- Israel's reluctance to provide arms to Ukraine has allowed Russian-Israeli coordination to continue in Syria.
- The energy crisis triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war led the US to revise its stance towards Saudi Arabia. The US-Iran talks ground to a halt in Vienna in the light of the growing ties between Iran and Russia. Israel took advantage of the new state of affairs, encouraging the rapprochement between Washington and Riyadh and countering the possibility of the US reopening its consulate in East Jerusalem.
- In coordination with the US, Israel has promoted the deepening of the Abraham Accords and drawn India into the new Middle East reality through the new I2U2 mechanism.
- Thanks to carefully managed communication, the Bennett-Lapid government was able to restore diplomatic relations with Turkey while maintaining close cooperation with Greece and Cyprus.
- It would seem advisable to put in place additional safeguards to maintain the quality of Athens-Nicosia -Jerusalem relations, similar to those which are expected to accompany the revamped relations between Israel and Turkey.

ON 13 JUNE 2021, A COALITION government was formed in Israel. The "Government of Change", as it has come to be known in the Israeli Press, was taking office after 12 years of rule by the country's longest-serving Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, whose decisions had had a decisive impact on Israeli foreign policy at both the regional and international levels.

## The eclectic Bennett-Lapid government

Predictions about how long the new government would last were pessimistic—and with good reason.

The "Government of Change" was the result of cooperation between political parties which, though in agreement on the need to end the Netanyahu era, espoused mutually contradictory ideological positions with regard to issues fundamental to the governing of Israel: from how to handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the degree to which Israel should be a Jewish state, and the position of the Arab minority in the decision-making process, to tackling the high cost of living and even the sovereignty status of Jerusalem.

The composition of the Cabinet introduced a number of firsts, starting with the Prime Minister himself, Naftali Bennett, who, in addition to deciding, despite his campaign pledges, to align himself after the election with left-wing political forces, became the first Israeli Prime Minister to keep Jewish religious observances and the Shabbat holiday, raising questions as to what extent this would allow him to carry out his duties unhindered.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Transport Minister and Labour Party leader Merav Michaeli,<sup>2</sup> along with ministers from the left-wing Meretz party, were in favour of public transport running on the Jewish Sabbath, the institution of civil marriage, conditional euthanasia, and the securing of social rights for the LGBTQ+ community,<sup>3</sup> including surrogacy and adoption by same-sex couples.<sup>4</sup> The Justice Minister, Gideon Sa'ar, a former cadre of the right-wing opposition Likud party, was against the Oslo Accords and in favour of annexing areas B and C of the West Bank.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the Minister for Regional Cooperation, Issawi Frej, the first Arab Muslim minister in an Israeli government, came from the left-wing Meretz party and supported the 'two nations, two states' principle

12 years of Netanyahu governments were followed by the most diverse administration in the country's history.

<sup>1</sup> Indicatively: Ben Caspit, "Is Israel ready for a religious prime minister?", Al-Monitor, 11.8.2020 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/israel-naftali-bennett-benjamin-netanyahu-yair-lapid-sharon.html> and Oren Kessler, "The Meaning of Israel's First Religious Prime Minister", Foreign Policy, 7.6.2021 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/07/naftali-bennett-israel-first-religious-prime-minister> Naftali Bennett's religious lifestyle, as well as the fact that he was born in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, was a topic of public discourse in Israel and abroad even before the formation of a coalition government under his leadership was considered a possibility.

<sup>2</sup> Ynet, "Transportation minister says will work to allow public transport on Shabbat", 22.11.2021

<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r1zk1wt00k> Statements by Transport Minister and Labour Party leader Merav Michaeli, on the Ynet website of the *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper.

<sup>3</sup> The Times of Israel, "Meretz says coalition deal includes push for LGBT right; Ra'am vows to oppose", 3.6.2021

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/meretz-says-coalition-deal-includes-push-for-lgbt-rights-raam-vows-to-oppose>. Statements by the Minister of Health and leader of Meretz at the time, Nitzan Horowitz. On 23.8.2022, Horowitz was succeeded as party leader by Zehava Gal-On, who had already served as chairwoman of Meretz, 2012-2018. She explains her political positions on the English-language Israeli television network i24News. Cf. i24News, *The Interview*, 19.9.2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pheV40d7QWo>.

<sup>4</sup> Labour Party: A brief description of its parliamentary presence:

<https://en.idi.org.il/israeli-elections-and-parties/parties/labor-party-haavoda>.

Manifesto: <https://en.idi.org.il/media/16030/העבודה-מפלגת.pdf>

"Meretz" party: A brief description of its parliamentary presence:

<https://en.idi.org.il/israeli-elections-and-parties/parties/meretz>.

Manifesto: <https://en.idi.org.il/media/12374/מרצ-מצע.pdf> [source: Israel Democracy Institute [www.idi.org.il](http://www.idi.org.il)]

<sup>5</sup> The Washington Institute, "New leadership for Israel? A conversation with Gideon Sa'ar", 10.2.2021

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-leadership-israel-conversation-gideon-saar> Audio-visual recording and transcript of an interview Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar gave to Robert Satloff, the director of the US-based think tank, The Washington Institute.



For the first time, developments in the nation's domestic politics would be determined by an Arab party.

whereby East Jerusalem would become the capital of a future independent Palestinian state.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the newly-appointed Minister for Defence, Benny Gantz, who, as well as having shared a rotating prime ministership with Benjamin Netanyahu and belonging ideologically to the Centre Right, had also served previously as Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), in which role he had implemented a 'strong-arm policy' against the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>7</sup> For the first time, the religious parties of the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, which represent 1,125,000 Israeli citizens (12% of the total population),<sup>8</sup> did not join the governing coalition. This was because both the party of the Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid and the Israel Beitenu party of Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman are in favour of the compulsory conscription of students at Jewish theological schools and the compulsory introduction into religious schools of the core curriculum in place in state-run schools (e.g. Mathematics and English)—reforms the Ultra-Orthodox parties rejected.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the post-election convergences that brought an end to 12 years of right-wing rule under Netanyahu also marked a historic turning point in the Israeli political system. For the first time, how long the governing coalition lasted would be determined by an Arab party; "Ra'am" chose to support the "Government of Change" with its four seats, thus ensuring the minimum parliamentary majority of 61 seats required to form a government.<sup>10</sup> That the Islamist Arab party should choose to join forces with a "Jewish-Zionist coalition" would have been unthinkable until recently both for the local electorate, but above all for the other Arab minority parties, which had formed the Joint Arab List in 2013. The founding declaration of the Joint Arab List included a commitment to remain in opposition as long as the Palestinian issue remained unresolved as a position of principle.<sup>11</sup> The coalition secured the support of

<sup>6</sup> Arab News, *Frankly Speaking*, 5.6.2022 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2097026/frankly-speaking-s4-e6-esawi-frei-israeli-minister-regional-cooperation>. Recorded interview with Issawi Frej on the website of the English-language Saudi Arabian newspaper *Arab News*. Cf. Times of Israel, "Meretz minister says he won't run in next election, urges party chair to step aside", 5.7.2022 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/meretz-minister-says-he-wont-run-in-next-election-urges-party-chair-to-step-aside> On 5.7.2022, Frej announced that he would not be running in the general election on 1.11.2022, but would retain his post as Minister of Regional Cooperation in the caretaker government.

<sup>7</sup> The Washington Institute, "Defense Secretary Benny Gantz discusses Israel's strategic challenges", 11.4.2022 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defense-minister-benny-gantz-discusses-israels-strategic-challenges> Audio-visual recording and transcript of an interview Defense Minister Benny Gantz gave to Robert Satloff, the director of the US-based think tank, The Washington Institute.

<sup>8</sup> Misrad Rosh ha'Memshala, Ha' Moatsa ha'Leumit le-Kalkala, "Tarkhishey Okhlusya Ezorim li-Mdinat Israel 2020-2050" [Prime Minister's Office, National Economic Council, "Population estimates by administrative regions of the State of Israel 2020-2050"], 19.4.2021 [https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/israel.national.economics.council/viz/Draft\\_c/2020-2050](https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/israel.national.economics.council/viz/Draft_c/2020-2050). According to estimates published in April 2021 by the Prime Minister's Office National Economic Council, taking into account the growth rate of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community living in Israel today, it is estimated that by 2050, one in four citizens will belong to it.

<sup>9</sup> As an issue, the introduction of compulsory conscription for the Ultra-Orthodox Jews and the alignment of the curriculum taught at theological schools dates back to the first decades of the Israeli state; it would later form a key component of the ideological platform espoused as early as 2013 by the centre-left "Yesh Atid" party led by then caretaker Prime Minister Yair Lapid, as well as by the "Israel Beitenu" party led by the current Finance Minister, Avigdor Lieberman. Cf. Gabriel Haritos, "Ισραήλ: Πολιτειακές αλλαγές εν μέσω οξείας κομματικής πόλωσης" [*Israel: Political changes in the midst of acute partisan polarization*"], Analysis Paper no. 8/2014, KEMMIS, University of Peloponnese, 27.3.2014 [https://www.academia.edu/6575000/Ισραήλ\\_Πολιτειακές\\_εξελίξεις\\_εν\\_μέσω\\_οξείας\\_κομματικής\\_αντιπαράθεσης](https://www.academia.edu/6575000/Ισραήλ_Πολιτειακές_εξελίξεις_εν_μέσω_οξείας_κομματικής_αντιπαράθεσης)

<sup>10</sup> Ephraim Lavie, Meir Elran, Khader Sawaed, Ilham Shahbari, Jony Essa, "Ra'am joins the Government Coalition: Paving a Path to Jewish-Arab Political Partnership?", INSS Insight No.1489, 17.6.2021 <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/raam-party> On the decision taken by the Islamist party "Ra'am" to support the Bennett-Lapid government in parliament.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gabriel Haritos, "Η Αραβική Ψήφος στο Ισραήλ: Από τα 'Κόμματα-Δορυφόρους' της δεκαετίας του '50 στον Ενιαίο Αραβικό Συνδυασμό του 2015" [The Arab vote in Israel: from the Satellite Parties of the 1950s to the Joint Arab List of 2015], Policy Paper 5/2015, Cyprus Centre for European and International Affairs, University of Nicosia, May 2015 [https://ccea.unic.ac.cy/wp-content/uploads/Policy-Paper\\_5-2015-1.pdf](https://ccea.unic.ac.cy/wp-content/uploads/Policy-Paper_5-2015-1.pdf) Historical overview of the parliamentary presence of Arab parties in the Israeli political system. It lists the ideological positions of the "Ra'am" party and includes a Greek translation of the Joint Arab List's Founding Declaration of Principles published on 17.3.2015 (Al-Qa'yima al-Mushtaraka - Ha'Reshima ha'Meshutefet). Apart from "Ra'am", the List included the leftist bi-communal "Hadash", the nationalist "Balad" and the Islamist "Ta'al" parties. Ra'am left the Joint List and ran as an independent party in the parliamentary elections of 23.3.2021. Subsequently, the nationalist "Balad" party also decided to leave the Joint List and participate independently in the elections of 1.11.2022. See Times of Israel, "High Court overturns election bans for Arab Balad Party and ex-Yamina MK Chikli", 9.10.2022 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/high-court-overturns-election-bans-for-arab-balad-party-and-ex-yamina-mk-chikli>

"Ra'am", which represents the Islamist movement in southern Israel and a large part of the country's Bedouin community, in exchange for a commitment to legalize dozens of Arab settlements in the Negev desert and to support Arab municipalities and communities with public funding over a five-year period.<sup>12</sup>

Concerns about the effectiveness of such an eclectic government were also expressed in relation to its future handling of foreign policy, which requires not only the defining of fixed objectives but also the exploiting of the useful legacy of the 12 years of rule under Netanyahu, who, despite being accused of centralism, strengthened Israel's position at the international and regional level. Yair Lapid assuming the duties of Foreign Minister was an especially high-risk political gamble both for the "Government of Change" and for him personally, as he was called upon to prove that he was up to the job.

*Defining a single foreign policy line was a big gamble for the new Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid.*

The present analysis will attempt to assess the handling of Israeli foreign policy by the outgoing coalition government that took office on 13.6.2021 under Foreign Minister and current caretaker Prime Minister, Yair Lapid. The paper will look at specific issues that were of concern to Israel's international relations, and contrast its management of these issues with the foreign policy implemented under Netanyahu.

## Adapting Israeli foreign policy to the priorities of the Biden administration

Over its 12 years in power, the Netanyahu administration had cultivated close cooperation with the Republican Party, a choice that was supported by the American Jewish community organisation AIPAC. This had had a negative impact on Israel's relations with the United States when the Democrats took office under President Barack Obama, who criticised the Israeli government for its handling of the Palestinian issue.<sup>13</sup> The Netanyahu administration took this criticism as proof that the White House was unwilling to take on board the singular circumstances that made military action necessary, both in Gaza, which was under the control of Hamas, an organisation the State Department itself classified as an international terrorist organisation—<sup>14</sup> and in the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority's inability to control more radical trends in local society continued to result in armed attacks on Israeli targets. At the same time, arguing that a tolerant stance would be perceived as weakness by the Palestinians, the Netanyahu administration had both not restricted the Jewish settlement program in the West Bank and declared itself reluctant to return to the negotiating table.

With the Republican victory in the 2016 presidential election and Donald Trump taking office as president in January 2017, the US satisfied several long-standing Israeli requests: On 8/5/2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA<sup>15</sup> and on 2.11.2018 it put in place a package of

<sup>12</sup> Indicatively: a) Times of Israel, "Government legalizes 3 unrecognized Bedouin towns, fulfilling Ra'am's pledge", 3.11.2021 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/government-legalizes-3-unrecognized-bedouin-towns-fulfilling-raams-pledge>, b) Times of Israel, "Ra'am chief presents 5-year economic plan benefiting Arab-Israelis", 11.10.2021 [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/raam-chief-presents-5-year-economic-plan-benefiting-arab-israelis](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/raam-chief-presents-5-year-economic-plan-benefiting-arab-israelis)

<sup>13</sup> Indicative of the frigid climate that developed between the Obama and Netanyahu administrations was the disclosure of the assessment of John Kerry, the serving US Secretary of State at the time, who said in a closed government session that "if the two-state solution to the Palestinian problem is not implemented soon, Israel risks becoming an 'apartheid state'". This statement was widely condemned in Israel. See Josh Rogin, "Exclusive: Kerry warns Israel could become an 'Apartheid State'", The News Beast, 27 April 2014 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/exclusive-kerry-warns-israel-could-become-an-apartheid-state>

<sup>14</sup> The State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism placed Hamas on the list of international terrorist organizations on 8.10.1987. See US State Department, Bureau of Counterterrorism, Foreign Terrorist Organizations <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations>

<sup>15</sup> Trump White House Archives, "Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action", 8.5.2018 <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action> Transcript of Donald Trump's statement.

*The passing of power between Democrats and Republicans in the White House has a profound impact on Israel-US relations.*

economic sanctions against Iran.<sup>16</sup> On 25.3.2019, Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights was recognised.<sup>17</sup> On 6.12.2019, Jerusalem was recognised as the capital of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Finally, although it quickly became clear that the Trump peace plan would remain unworkable with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,<sup>19</sup> US diplomatic moves paved the way for the subsequent signing of the Abraham Accords and the normalisation of Israel's diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco.<sup>20</sup> These important developments, all of which stemmed from close cooperation with the Trump administration, boosted Benjamin Netanyahu's popularity on the Israeli political scene.<sup>21</sup>

The Democrats return to power was bound to be a cause of concern for Israeli diplomacy. With President Joe Biden taking office in January 2021, there was a possibility that key responsibilities could be assigned to staffers who expressed the tendencies prevalent during the Obama administration, both in terms of the handling of the Palestinian issue and US-Iranian relations. While the post-election processes for forming a new government were underway in Israel, the new US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, announced during an official visit to Ramallah that the Biden administration intended to reopen the US Consulate in East Jerusalem with responsibility for the West Bank.<sup>22</sup> This statement presaged a change in US-Israel relations on the sensitive issue of Jerusalem, but also on the Palestinian issue in general.

Given the political change in the White House, the new coalition government formed in Israel on 13.6.2021 would be obliged to adjust its relations with the US accordingly. The responsibility for doing so fell primarily on the new Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the handling of the Palestinian issue, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett drew a 'red line' of his own, making it clear to the Americans that if the US decided to reopen its Consulate in East Jerusalem, it would effectively negate the political significance of the

<sup>16</sup> Trump White House Archives, "President Donald J. Trump is reimposing all sanctions lifted under the unacceptable Iran Deal", 2.11.2018 <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-reimposing-sanctions-lifted-unacceptable-iran-deal> The text of the written statement.

<sup>17</sup> Trump White House Archives, "Remarks by President Trump at signing of Presidential Proclamation recognizing Israel's Sovereign Right over the Golan Heights", 26.3.2019 <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-signing-presidential-proclamation-recognizing-israels-sovereign-right-golan-heights> Transcript of the joint statements made by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on 25.3.2019.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Embassy in Israel, "Statement by Former President Trump on Jerusalem", 6.12.2017 <https://il.usembassy.gov/statement-president-trump-jerusalem> The text of the presidential statement. The US Embassy in Arnona, West Jerusalem, was inaugurated on 14 May 2018. The choice of date was symbolic, as the independence of the State of Israel was declared on 14 May 1948.

<sup>19</sup> Trump White House Archives, "Peace to Prosperity - A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People", 4.2.2020 <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/peacetoprospersity> The full text of the "Trump Plan" for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

<sup>20</sup> The texts of the "Abraham Accords": a) Israel-UAE Agreement, 15.9.2020 [ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UAE-Israel-treaty-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508.pdf> ], b) Israel-Bahrain Joint Statement, 15.9.2020 [ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bahrain-Israel-Agreement-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508.pdf> ], c) Israel-Morocco Joint Statement, 10.12.2020 [ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf> ]

<sup>21</sup> Times of Israel, "Netanyahu uses Trump in election campaign posters", 3.2.2019 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-uses-trump-in-election-campaign-posters> The giant election posters on buildings in major Israeli cities depicting the two leaders together served as proof of the close relationship between Netanyahu and Trump.

<sup>22</sup> Al Jazeera, "Blinken announces US plans to reopen Jerusalem consulate", 25.5.2021 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/blinken-announces-us-plans-to-reopen-jerusalem-consulate#:~:text=Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Tuesday, in charge of diplomatic relations with the Palestinians> The US Consulate in East Jerusalem had been taken out of service in 2019, following the transfer of the Embassy's headquarters from Tel Aviv and the inauguration of its new complex in West Jerusalem. Until 2019, the Consulate in the city's eastern sector had served Palestinian residents of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

<sup>23</sup> On the eve of the US presidential election of 3.11.2020 and in the light of an expected victory for Joe Biden, Yair Lapid stressed the need to improve his country's relations with the Democratic Party "so the new American President will be a friend of Israel". See The Jerusalem Post, "Lapid vows to heal relationship with Democrats", 2.11.2020 <https://www.jpost.com/us-elections/lapid-vows-to-heal-relationship-with-democrats-647765>

recognition of “the entire city of Jerusalem” as Israel’s capital.<sup>24</sup> Such a development was likely to lead to the collapse of the fragile new coalition government and to new elections which could return Benjamin Netanyahu to power.<sup>25</sup> The Biden administration heeded the Israeli warning, and has not as yet proceeded with the planned move, even though the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, never fails to recall this commitment on the part of the US in his public statements.<sup>26</sup>

*Jerusalem, a united and undivided capital: a red line for the Bennett-Lapid government.*

On the issue of limiting the Iranian nuclear programme, the new US administration intends to renegotiate the terms of the JCPOA and rejoin.<sup>27</sup> However, the US should have taken into account the achievements of the Abraham Accords which, apart from normalising Israel's bilateral relations with important Sunni countries in the Gulf (including, unofficially, Saudi Arabia), had essentially appointed Israel the regional 'protector-partner' of the pro-Western Sunni monarchies against Iranian penetration in Yemen and Iraq. Having ascertained that the State Department, far from changing former President Trump's policy of deepening Israel-UAE-Bahrain-Morocco regional cooperation, would actually be encouraging it still more, the Israeli Bennett-Lapid administration did not miss the opportunity to capitalize on the opportunity this presented. On the other hand, Israeli diplomacy under Yair Lapid also had to take into account the American choice to put an end to the open question of limiting Tehran's nuclear programme. The new situation forced the Israeli government to prepare local public opinion to accept there was no option other than to make the necessary efforts to highlight Israel's concerns over its national security,<sup>28</sup> while closely monitoring the ongoing negotiations in Vienna. In this context, Israeli military and secret service officers have intensified their interactions with their counterparts in the US, over and above diplomatic channels. At the same time, cyber-attacks made on and by Israel and Iran have come to light, just as they did during Netanyahu's tenure, along with assassinations of scientists involved in developing the Iranian nuclear programme, which Tehran accuses the Israeli secret services of committing.

*Israel had to adapt to the priorities of the Biden administration with regard to Iran and Palestine.*

Given the above, the updated stance taken by Israeli diplomacy towards the new Biden administration in the US, which lasted through to the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, can be summarised as follows:

- Tolerance of the United States' declared willingness to renegotiate its relations with Iran with a view to revising the framework for international monitoring of the Iranian nuclear programme, while seeking in parallel to safeguard Israeli interests by stressing

<sup>24</sup> On 6.11.2021, the new Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, commenting on the content of his communication with the Biden administration, stated that "there is no room for another American Consulate in Jerusalem. We have always stated our positions calmly and without drama, and expect them to be understood. Jerusalem is the capital of one state and that is the State of Israel". Cf. Reuters, "Israel suggests US to open US consulate for Palestinians in West Bank, not Jerusalem", 7.11.2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-suggests-us-open-consulate-palestinians-west-bank-not-jerusalem-2021-11-06>

<sup>25</sup> The Jerusalem Post, "Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem jeopardizes Israeli gov't - Lapid", 1.9.2021 <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/fm-us-opening-of-jerusalem-consulate-for-pa-will-jeopardize-our-govt-678384> The statement Lapid made two weeks after the formation of the new government is typical: 'We have an interesting yet delicate structure of our government, and we think this might destabilize this government, and I don't think the American administration wants this to happen.'

<sup>26</sup> That the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, should have recalled the US government's commitment to reopen the Consulate in East Jerusalem in the official joint statements he made with President Biden in Bethlehem on 15.7.2022 was entirely typical: "[...] We look forward to steps from the U.S. administration to strengthen bilateral relations by reopening the U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem, removing the PLO from the U.S. terrorist list. We are not terrorists. [...]". Cf. The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority in Joint Press Statement | Bethlehem, West Bank", 15.7.2022 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/15/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-abbas-of-the-palestinian-national-authority-in-joint-press-statement-bethlehem-west-bank> Transcript of the joint statements made to the press.

<sup>27</sup> CNN, "US says it is willing to sit down for talks with Iran and other nations on nuclear deal", 18.2.2021 <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/18/politics/us-iran-violations-diplomacy/index.html> Announcement by State Department spokesman Ned Price that the US wants to resume negotiations to update the terms of the JCPOA.

<sup>28</sup> Newsweek, "Israel prepares to live with US-Iran Nuclear Deal and its Middle East impact", 1.5.2021 <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-prepares-live-us-iran-nuclear-deal-mideast-impact-1588005> Analysis indicative of the climate in Israel-US relations ahead of the resumption of talks in Vienna.



the importance of the new framework for regional cooperation fostered by the Abraham Accords.

- An attempt to postpone possible US diplomatic initiatives vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue, which would jeopardise the longevity of the Bennett-Lapid administration.<sup>29</sup>
- A deepening of the newly established bilateral diplomatic relations established by the Abraham Accords, culminating in the convening of the Negev Forum at which Yair Lapid hosted his counterparts, the foreign ministers of the US, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt, for the first time in Israel, on 27-28 March 2022.<sup>30</sup>

*The possibility of a US-Iran deal: a 'necessary evil'.*

### Updating Israel-Russia relations vis-à-vis the handling of the Syrian crisis

The course of the civil war in Syria was of major concern to the Netanyahu administration. Israeli concerns centred on the extent to which the instability in the neighbouring country would increase the ongoing tension between Israel and Hezbollah. Tehran's involvement in the balance of power within Syria strengthens Iran's penetration dangerously close to Israeli territory. At the same time, Hezbollah is also involved in the Syrian civil war, where it both reinforces the Iranian factor on the ground and transports Iranian armaments between Syria and South Lebanon.

*The achievements of the Abraham Accords had to be retained.*

In the summer of 2015, in response to an appeal from the regime in Damascus,<sup>31</sup> Russia decided to become actively involved in the Syrian civil war and Israeli diplomacy saw potential in this development. On 21.9.2015, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu met in Moscow, laying the foundations for a peculiar form of a 'Russian-Israeli Entente' vis-à-vis the management of the volatile situation in Syria. In particular, it was agreed that the Russian and Israeli armed forces would coordinate their activities, so the Israeli air force would be in a position to prevent Iran infiltrating Syria to such an extent that it posed a threat to Israeli security.<sup>32</sup> This practice continued through to the end of Netanyahu's tenure as Prime Minister.

However, there seems to have been a shift in Russia's intentions when the new Bennett-Lapid government assumed its duties on 13.6.2021. On 26.7.2021, an astonished Israeli media carried the news that a Russian military official had reported Russian forces in Syria encountering Israeli air strikes; surprisingly, these had not been referred to beforehand by SANA, the Syrian state news agency, as had been the case previously.<sup>33</sup> In the following weeks, Russian criticism of Israel's activities in Syria mounted.<sup>34</sup> At first light on 3.9.2021, in response to yet another Israeli airstrike, a Syrian surface-to-air missile was launched against Israel,

<sup>29</sup> Indicative of the official Israeli position of not discussing the possibility of the US Consulate reopening in East Jerusalem was the total absence of the Palestinian issue from Naftali Bennett's speech before the UN General Assembly on 27.9.2021. Cf. Israel Government, Prime Minister's Office, "Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's Address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York", 27.9.2021 [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event\\_un270921](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_un270921) The text of the speech.

<sup>30</sup> See "Deepening the Abraham Accords"

<sup>31</sup> SANA, "Syria's ambassador to Russia urges all countries to join Syria and Russia against terrorism", 1.10.2015 <http://sana.sy/en/?p=56454> By October 2015, Russia had already consolidated its military presence in Syria.

<sup>32</sup> Israel Government, Prime Minister's Office, "PM Netanyahu meets with Russia President Vladimir Putin", 27.9.2015 <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/eventputin210915> Transcript of the joint statements made by the two leaders in Moscow on 27.9.2015.

<sup>33</sup> Ynet, "Rusia toenet: Sikalnu shalosh tkifot israeliot be-Suria ba-shavua ha'akharon" ["Russia claims: We averted three Israeli attacks in the last week"], 26.7.2021 <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/h1bb66s000>

<sup>34</sup> Indicatively: Vladimir Platov, "Russia closes Syrian skies for Israel", NEO-New Eastern Outlook, 31.7.2021 <https://journal-neo.org/2021/07/31/russia-closes-syrian-skies-for-israel> 31.31.2009. Op-ed on a Russian news website criticizing the ongoing Israeli military presence in Syria.



landing in the sea off Tel Aviv. The sonic boom was heard in every major city in central Israel, and the Tel Aviv police spent the following morning collecting shrapnel from the city's parks.<sup>35</sup> The Kremlin could not have sent a clearer message to Israel's new political leadership.

*Russia has restricted but not removed the Israeli presence in Syria.*

The following month, Naftali Bennett was invited to Sochi to meet President Putin on 21.10.2021. At the meeting, it was reaffirmed that Russia and Israel would continue to coordinate their management of the situation in Syria.<sup>36</sup> However, Israel's air operations have become less frequent since the meeting. Russia and Israel's 'understanding' in Syria clearly operated at a higher level during Netanyahu's tenure as Prime Minister than it did between the formation of the new Bennett-Lapid government (13.6.2021) and the start of the war in Ukraine (24.2.2022).

### The defining role of the Ukrainian conflict

When war broke out in Ukraine, Israeli diplomacy was focused on seeking to influence as effectively as possible the negotiating line taken by the Biden administration vis-à-vis the revision of the terms of the JCPOA, at a time when there were growing signs that a successful outcome to the Vienna talks was imminent.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Israeli diplomacy was preparing to host the Negev Forum, at which, in the wake of the signing of the Abraham Accords, the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco would be meeting in Israel for the first time; efforts were also underway to convince their counterparts from Egypt and Jordan to participate, as well.<sup>38</sup>

*Israel unwilling to take a position on Ukraine.*

While, initially, the prevailing view in Israel was that the Russia-Ukraine crisis would not develop into a protracted war, subsequent developments proved these assessments to have been wrong. And although the hostilities were taking place far away geographically, all eyes were now on Israel, primarily due to the repeated public appeals made by the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who, making communicative use of his Jewish ancestry, called on the Bennett-Lapid government to mediate as early as the first twenty-four hours of the Russian intervention,<sup>39</sup> and later to strengthen the Ukrainian armed forces militarily.<sup>40</sup>

It was thought that the possible provision of military assistance to the Ukrainian side by Israel would impact negatively on its sensitive relations with Russia, possibly imperilling Russian-Israeli coordination in dealing with Iran/Hezbollah infiltration in Syria.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, should Israel decide to reinforce the Ukrainian armed forces, it could ask the US to adopt Israeli proposals in return for stricter supervision of the Iranian nuclear programme, at a time when an agreement was supposedly imminent in the Vienna negotiations. On a purely

<sup>35</sup> Maariv, "Resisei til she-shugar mi-Suria ve hitpotzetz meal ha'yam utru be-rakhavei Tel Aviv" ["Fragments of a missile which was launched from Syria and exploded, falling into the sea, were found in the Tel Aviv area"], 3.9.2021 <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-863332>

<sup>36</sup> State of Israel, Prime Minister's Office, "PM Bennett and President of Russia Vladimir Putin are currently meeting for the first time in Sochi, Russia", 22.10.2021 [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event\\_putin221021](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_putin221021) Statements made by Naftali Bennett.

<sup>37</sup> In early February 2022, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid told local media that "For the time being, the Israeli assessment is that no violent confrontation is expected in Ukraine", adding that Israel is concerned that the Russia-Ukraine crisis risks diverting international interest from the Vienna talks on Iran's nuclear programme. Cf. Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel doesn't see violent Russia-Ukraine confrontation", AXIOS, 2.2.2022 <https://www.axios.com/2022/02/02/israel-russia-ukraine-confrontation-lapid>

<sup>38</sup> See "Deepening the Abraham Accords"

<sup>39</sup> Reuters, "Zelenskiy asks Israel to mediate with Russia, Ukraine envoy says", 26.2.2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/israeli-pm-spoke-with-ukraine-president-offers-humanitarian-aid-2022-02-25> Statements by Ukraine's Ambassador to Tel Aviv, Yevgeny Kornichuk.

<sup>40</sup> The Ukrainian President's appeals culminated in the video message he addressed to the members of the Knesset on 20.3.2022 in which he criticized the stance taken by the Israeli government in not responding to calls for arms shipments. The parallels he drew between the military conflict in Ukraine and the Jewish Holocaust, coupled with the intensity of his delivery, provoked reactions from part of Israel's political world. Cf. President of Ukraine-Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Knesset", 20.3.2022 <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-v-kneseti-73701> Transcript of Zelenskiy's speech.

<sup>41</sup> See "Updating Israel-Russia relations in the management of the Syrian crisis"

*Israel stood at the side of the US on Ukraine in exchange for its adoption of a tough line with regard to Iran.*

communicative level, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett wished to show sensitivity to the fact the Ukrainian President was of Jewish origin, as this would probably enhance his popularity among the pool of voters positioned ideologically on the National-Religious Right. Israeli diplomacy was faced with a serious dilemma not only in terms of strategy, but also in terms of its domestic and international communication.

On 24.2.2022, in his first public statement on the Ukrainian issue, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid tried to strike a balance by condemning the Russian invasion on the one hand, but also stressing that Israel would maintain good relations with both Russia and Ukraine.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the Israeli government chose the route of offering to mediate between Russia and Ukraine as the safest way to avoid the need to clearly choose a 'camp'.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett utilized the existing channels of communication with Moscow, and the international media showed interest when it was leaked that the Israeli government had proposed to the leaders of Russia and Ukraine that they meet in Jerusalem to resolve the crisis. Naftali Bennett's mediation proposal coincided with similar efforts by the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In consultation with the US, France and Germany, Bennett met President Putin in Moscow on 5.3.2022 in what came across as a last-ditch effort on the part of Israeli mediation,<sup>43</sup> which— like the Turkish initiative—failed to yield results. However, Israel—and Turkey—had both shown that, at a tense juncture with the Moscow-Europe-Washington channels down, they were the only two countries in the West that could still talk to Russia. At the same time, the Israeli side could now counter Ukrainian demands by saying it had "done its best", having already provided Ukraine with helmets, bulletproof vests, humanitarian aid and medicine as well as running field hospitals to treat Ukrainian refugees.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, by participating on the invitation of the US Department of Defense with another 39 Western countries in a meeting held under NATO auspices at the US base in Ramstein, Germany, on 26.4.2022, to coordinate support to the Ukrainian armed forces, Israel had clearly chosen its camp.<sup>45</sup>

*Israel opts for a mediatory role in Ukraine to keep its coordination with Russia ongoing in Syria.*

Although this development was undoubtedly significant for the progress made in Israel-NATO relations,<sup>46</sup> it did not ultimately lead to the provision of Israeli military assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces. The Lapid administration's negative responses to Kiev's repeated requests to be supplied the Israeli-built Iron Dome missile defence system is indicative. Specifically, on 19.10.2022, the Minister of Defence, Benny Gantz, countered with an offer to supply the Ukrainian side with the "Red Alert" electronic system, which employs various telecommunication means to alert civilians to seek refuge in bomb shelters when a missile attack is imminent; the system is already in use in Israel, and especially on the borders with Gaza and Lebanon. The Israeli Defence Minister's clarification that Israel "will not provide

<sup>42</sup> Times of Israel, "Lapid condemns 'Russian attack on Ukraine', tells Israelis to head to land crossings", 24.2.2022

[https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/lapid-condemns-russian-attack-on-ukraine-tells-israelis-to-head-to-land-crossings](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/lapid-condemns-russian-attack-on-ukraine-tells-israelis-to-head-to-land-crossings) Statements by Yair Lapid.

<sup>43</sup> Reuters, "Israeli PM meets Putin in Moscow, then speaks with Zelenskiy by phone", 5.3.2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/israeli-pm-bennett-meets-putin-moscow-discuss-ukraine-crisis-2022-03-05>

<sup>44</sup> The despatching of Israeli humanitarian aid to protect Ukraine's citizens began on 20.4.2022. Indicatively: Ynet, "La-rishona: Israel tesayea la-milkhama be-Ukraine be-aspakat alfei kсадot va-apodim" ["For the first time: Israel will help Ukraine in the war by sending thousands of helmets and bulletproof vests"] 20.4.2022 <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/sy2r7f6e5>

<sup>45</sup> Times of Israel, "Israel attends US-led summit on sending more arms to Ukraine", 26.4.2022 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-attending-us-led-summit-on-supplying-ukraine-with-more-arms>

<sup>46</sup> On the prospects of broadening the framework for Israel-NATO cooperation, see Rina Bassist, "Israel draws closer to NATO", Al-Monitor, 30.6.2022 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/israel-draws-closer-nato>

weapons systems to Ukraine for purely practical reasons<sup>47</sup> aroused the displeasure of his counterpart in Kiev, who cancelled a telephone meeting scheduled for the next day.<sup>48</sup>

Israel's persistent refusal to actively involve itself in the war in Ukraine is easily explained with reference to the public warning issued by the Vice Chairman of the Security Council of Russia and close associate of President Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, when it was leaked to the media on 17.10.2022 that Ukraine was seeking to acquire Israeli weapons in an attempt to exploit evidence indicating that Russian forces were using Iranian military drones in their operations.<sup>49</sup> Medvedev warned that if Israel did ultimately respond positively to the Ukrainian request, "it will completely destroy diplomatic relations between Jerusalem and Moscow".<sup>50</sup> Were this to happen, the coordination between Russia and Israel on the Syrian front would come to an end—an eventuality the Israeli side was striving to avoid at all costs.

*Israel strengthens its ties to NATO, but does not supply arms to Ukraine.*

## The Biden administration's about-turn on the Palestinian issue and US-Saudi relations

On 8.6.2022, the International Atomic Energy Agency condemned Iran for its unwillingness to facilitate the supervision of some of its nuclear facilities.<sup>51</sup> This development created an even more unpleasant atmosphere at the US-Iran talks, which had now reached a stalemate; this lent support to Israel's argument that the JCPOA would be unable to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear arsenal.

During this same period, the rise in oil and gas prices gradually prompted Washington to moderate its criticism of Saudi Arabia with respect to its human rights record and alleged involvement in the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Aware of the problems facing the US economy, the Biden administration needed to persuade Riyadh not to maintain a policy of equal distance from the US and Russia, and to increase oil production in order to bring prices down. The need for a healthy channel of communication between Washington and Riyadh was noted by the Israeli side, which stressed that the Saudis should not be marginalized. In any case, the foundations for military cooperation between Israel and the pro-Western Gulf monarchies had already been laid by the framework of the Abraham

<sup>47</sup> Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation-KAN, "Gantz amar she isapek le-Ukraina maarkhot hagana - ha'hesber ha'male" ["Gantz said he will supply Ukraine with an electronic citizen warning system - The full explanation"], 19.10.2022 <https://www.kan.org.il/item/?itemId=136377> Defence Minister Benny Gantz made the following statement to the EU's diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv: "Israel supports Ukraine and is on its side, on the side of NATO and the West. We have stated this on numerous occasions. Israel is implementing a policy of supporting Ukraine through the provision of humanitarian aid and material for protecting unarmed civilians. In the next few days, I will be approving an additional support package, as we have done in the past. However, I would like to stress that Israel will not provide arms to Ukraine for a range of practical reasons. We will continue to support Ukraine within the constraints in place on us, as we have done thus far."

<sup>48</sup> Ynet, "Al reka ha'kaas be-Kiev: Nidkhata sikha ben Ganz le-sar ha'bitakhon ha'ukraini" ["Due to Kiev's anger: Gantz's telephone conversation with the Ukrainian Minister of Defence has been cancelled"], 20.10.2022 <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rj004oac7i>

<sup>49</sup> See The New York Times, "The Iranian Drones in Ukraine's Already Crowded Skies", 19.10.2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/us/politics/ukraine-drones-iran-russia.html> Ukrainian allegations of the use of Iranian Shahed-136 drones by Russian military forces.

<sup>50</sup> Times of Israel, "Russian ex-President: If Israel sends weapons to Ukraine it will destroy Moscow ties", 17.10.2022 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russian-ex-president-if-israel-sends-weapons-to-ukraine-it-will-destroy-moscow-ties> The Telegram post by Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, is quoted below: "It seems that Israel will provide arms to the Kiev regime. A highly reckless move. It will destroy all our bilateral diplomatic relations."

<sup>51</sup> Announcements on the 8.9.2022 decision of the International Atomic Energy Agency: a) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [US Department of State, Press Statement, Antony J. Blinken, "The IAEA Board of Governors Resolution on Iran", 9.6.2022 <https://www.state.gov/the-iaea-board-of-governors-resolution-on-iran> ], b) the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "Israel welcomes IAEA Board of Governors decision regarding Iran", 8.6.2022 <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/israel-welcomes-iaea-board-of-governors-decision-regarding-iran-8-jun-2022> ]. Cf. Farid Mahoutchi, "What the draft resolution in the IAEA Board means for Iran", PMOI-People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, 8.9.2022 <https://english.mojahedin.org/article/what-the-draft-resolution-in-the-iaea-board-of-governors-means-for-iran> Op-ed by the Iranian opposition People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, on the political significance of the resolution.

*Ukraine, stalled talks with Iran, and the energy crisis cause the US to change its policy towards Saudi Arabia and the Palestine Issue.*

*On 14.7.2022, Israel and the US sign a joint declaration of cooperation also known as the "Jerusalem Declaration".*

Accords.<sup>52</sup> Should the Vienna talks fail, there was every chance the Israel-Gulf security mechanism would prove effective in maintaining critical regional balances.

These developments altered the stance taken by American foreign policy during the first months of the Biden presidency with regard both to the possibility of a US Consulate operating in East Jerusalem and to Washington's stance towards the government in Riyadh. President Biden confirmed this about-turn during his tour of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (13-16.7.2022).

On 14.7.2022, Biden and Lapid signed the "Jerusalem US-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration" (also known as the "Jerusalem Declaration") which reaffirms the US commitment to defending Israel's security and to maintaining its military supremacy at the regional level.<sup>53</sup> The US pledged that it would not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear arsenal and that it would work to deepen the Abraham Accords by urging other Muslim countries to normalise their diplomatic relations with Israel.

With regard to Saudi Arabia, a week before his tour of the Middle East, the US President made a clear volte face with regard to his critical stance towards Riyadh. Wanting to explain this change to the American public, he felt obliged to justify his decision to visit Jeddah in July 2022 in an article in the *Washington Post* in which he prioritized the need to serve US national interests effectively in the midst of an energy crisis.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, in his joint official statements with the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, in Bethlehem on 15.7.2022, President Biden advocated the need to resolve the Palestinian issue on the basis of the 'two nations, two states' principle. Nonetheless, he urged the Palestinian political leadership to work on strengthening democratic institutions and fighting corruption in the Palestinian Authority. In essence, the US President did not raise the issue of the reopening of the US Consulate in East Jerusalem by not mentioning it in his public statements.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> On 3.2.2022, Israel and Bahrain signed an MoU on military cooperation. Although no such memorandum was signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, the military staffs of the two countries are believed to be in contact. Israeli and Emirati warplanes participated in a series of joint military exercises between 2020 and 2022. In contrast, the framework for cooperation in the military sphere has been further consolidated between Israel and Morocco, with the two countries signing a defence cooperation agreement on 24.11.2021. Indicatively: a) Maariv, "Yikhazek et yetzivut-ha'ezor: Israel u-Vakhrein khatmu al eskem havanot bitkhoni histori" ["It will strengthen regional stability": Israel and Bahrain sign a defence memorandum of understanding of historic importance"], 3.2.2022 <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-895683> (b) HaAretz, "Ganz khatam al eskem le-shituf peula bitkhoni ben Israel le-Maroko" ["Gants signed a defense cooperation agreement between Israel and Morocco"], 24.11.2021 <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2021-11-24/ty-article/0000017f-db2f-df9c-a17f-ff3fd7b50000>

<sup>53</sup> The White House, "The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration", 14.7.2022 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/the-jerusalem-u-s-israel-strategic-partnership-joint-declaration> The text of the declaration

<sup>54</sup> Joe Biden, "Why I'm going to Saudi Arabia", The Washington Post, 9 July 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/>. Nevertheless, in October 2022, tension was noted in US-Saudi bilateral relations when the Riyadh government went along with the decision taken by OPEC+ to reduce oil production. In an interview John Kirby, a National Security Council spokesman, gave on 11.10.2022 to CNN, he stressed that this development would be leading the US to reconsider its attitude towards the political leadership of Saudi Arabia. See CNN, "White House says Biden will work with Congress to 're-evaluate' relationship with Saudi Arabia", 11 Oct. 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/11/politics/saudi-arabia-white-house-john-kirby-cntv/index.html>

<sup>55</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority in Joint Press Statement | Bethlehem, West Bank", 15 July 2022 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/15/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-abbas-of-the-palestinian-national-authority-in-joint-press-statement-bethlehem-west-bank> Transcripts of the joint statements made by the two leaders. On the need to strengthen the institutions in the Palestinian Authority, President Biden said: "[...] These are the kinds of issues that progress can make life better for people right away, and we should be about it right away. And the Palestinian Authority has important work to do as well, if you don't mind my saying. Now is the time to strengthen Palestinian institutions, to improve governance, transparency, and accountability. All of this work is critical. And it will help build a society that can support a successful, democratic future, and a future Palestinian state. And the United States will work with you, President Abbas, at every step [...]"



## Deepening the Abraham Accords

*Israel seeks to upgrade the Negev Forum into a permanent mechanism for promoting regional cooperation with the Arab world within the framework of the Abraham Accords.*

The signing of the Abraham Accords marked the normalisation of Israel's diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, realising one of the main pillars of Israeli foreign policy since the state's establishment in 1948: its peaceful coexistence with the Arab countries of the Middle East. Iran's role as a regional power, which is perceived as a threat both by Israel and by the Sunni pro-Western monarchies of the Gulf, played a decisive role in this development. Although the controversial 'Trump Peace Plan' for the resolution of the Palestinian issue was taken off the table almost immediately, it did serve as a catalyst for the intensive preparatory contacts which ultimately ushered in conditions conducive to Israel normalising its diplomatic relations with certain pro-Western Gulf monarchies.

For the new Bennett-Lapid government, not deepening ties with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco was not an option. The UAE had already inaugurated its embassy in Tel Aviv during the Netanyahu administration, while an Israeli Liaison Office was already operational in Rabat as were Israeli Diplomatic Missions in Abu Dhabi and Manama. Ten days after taking office, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid officially inaugurated first the Israeli embassies in the UAE<sup>56</sup> and Bahrain<sup>57</sup>, on 29.6.2021 and 30.6.2021 respectively, and then the Liaison Office in Rabat on 12.8.2021.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, Israel, Morocco and Bahrain laid the foundations for the development of bilateral military cooperation.<sup>59</sup> Finally, the simultaneous presence of both Israeli and Emirati fighter jets at international exercises, and Israeli tourists staying in hotels in the UAE and Morocco, was no longer newsworthy.

The culmination of the efforts made by the Bennett-Lapid government to deepen the Abraham Accords was the Negev Summit it hosted on 27-28.3.2022, at which the foreign ministers of Israel, the US, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt met for the first time. At the summit, the ministers agreed to set up joint working groups to draw up a common framework for cooperation in the areas of security and countering international terrorism, as well as in the following soft-policy areas: green energy, education and peaceful coexistence, food and water security, health, tourism.<sup>60</sup> The Israeli side proposed that the conference be established as the "Negev Forum" and expressed its desire to convene in a different desert city each time, in order to highlight the similar challenges confronting all the participating countries. At the same time, the summit did not rule out other countries in the region, Arab or otherwise, joining the forum, whether they have normalised their relations with Israel or not.<sup>61</sup> It was, however, characteristic that, while the Israeli side had included in the official programme a joint visit

<sup>56</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "FM Lapid inaugurates Israeli Embassy in Abu Dhabi", 29.6.2021 <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/fm-lapid-inaugurates-israel-embassy-in-abu-dhabi-29-june-2021>

<sup>57</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "FM Lapid inaugurates Israeli Embassy in Manama", 30.9.2021 <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/news/fm-lapid-inaugurates-israeli-embassy-in-manama-30-september-2021>

<sup>58</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "FM Lapid inaugurates Israeli Liaison Office in Rabat", 12.8.2021 <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/news/fm-lapid-inaugurates-israeli-liaison-office-in-rabat-12-august-2021>

<sup>59</sup> Israel-Bahrain: Maariv, "Yikhazek et yetzivut-ha'ezor: Israel u-Vahrein khatmu al eskem havanot bitkhoni histori" ["It will strengthen regional stability: Israel and Bahrain sign a defence memorandum of understanding of historic importance"], 3.2.2022 <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-895683>

Israel-Morocco: HaAretz, "Ganz khatam al eskem le-shituf peula bitkhoni ben Israel le-Maroko" ["Gantz signs a defense cooperation agreement between Israel and Morocco"], 24.11.2021 <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2021-11-24/ty-article/0000017f-db2f-df9c-a17f-ff3fd7b50000>

<sup>60</sup> In June 2022, the countries that participated in the Negev Forum in March of that year defined the areas of competence of each of the joint working groups. Cf. U.S. Department of State, Media Note, "Negev Forum Steering Committee Joint Statement", 27.6.2022 <https://www.state.gov/negev-forum-steering-committee-joint-statement>

<sup>61</sup> The proposals Yair Lapid had announced at the Negev Forum in March 2022 in his capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs, with a view to developing the newly-established institution into a permanent intergovernmental mechanism for regional cooperation, were adopted by a Cabinet resolution of the caretaker government on 18.9.2022. See State of Israel, Prime Minister's Office, Press Release, "Government approves PM Yair Lapid's proposal to establish a Regional Mechanism - the Negev Forum", 18.9.2022 [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke\\_forum180922](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke_forum180922)

and photo session for all participating foreign ministers at the site of the tomb of the country's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, only Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and his American counterpart Antony Blinken attended.<sup>62</sup> The conspicuous absence of the Arab foreign ministers from this site, which was only three kilometres away from the venue of the official meetings, is a reminder that it remains difficult for the political leaderships of those Arab states that maintain full diplomatic relations with Israel to handle the historical past of the Arab-Israeli conflict at a communicational level.

*I2U2: the new template for regional cooperation draws India closer to the Abraham Accords.*

The Russia-Ukraine war had the potential to cause a serious food crisis in the countries of the Middle East, which are heavily dependent on Ukrainian grain. This would seem to be gradually adding another important dimension to the more general framework for regional cooperation which the Abraham Accords have put in place. The online meeting between President Biden, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, and the President of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammad bin Zayed, during his tour of Israel last July is indicative of this new dimension. At their meeting, which has been dubbed "I2U2" for the sake of brevity, the four leaders agreed to lay the foundations for a pioneering project: with \$2 billion in funding from the United Arab Emirates, India will make land available for US and Israeli companies to implement green technology models for large-scale agro-pastoral production capable of meeting the nutritional needs of large numbers of people. Moreover, other countries that signed the Abraham Accords are also invited to participate in this project.<sup>63</sup>

A few months earlier, on 22.11.2021, and in a similar vein, Israel, Jordan and the UAE had signed an inter-state agreement in Dubai within the framework for cooperation provided for by the Abraham Accords. In this case, a solar power plant is to be created in the Jordanian desert at Wadi Rum and a water desalination centre built on the coast of the Dead Sea in Israel, with both projects to be funded by the UAE. By the terms of this agreement, Israel will supply the Jordanian market with high-quality desalinated water and in return, Israel will receive electricity generated in Jordan.<sup>64</sup>

*Strengthening Israel-Jordan ties with UAE funding.*

It is clear that Israeli foreign policy under the Bennett-Lapid government has put the achievements of its predecessor, the Netanyahu administration, to effective use. However, since the new government took office on 13.6.2021, there have been no further moves to reach out to other Arab countries in the Middle East and Africa that could conceivably join the Abraham Accords, with which the Israeli side had made progress under Netanyahu. However, the apparent causes of this stasis can be traced back primarily to the domestic political instability of those countries, or to singular regional balances each of those countries is obliged to maintain.

Specifically, regarding the possibility of normalising bilateral relations between Israel and Sudan, significant progress was made under Benjamin Netanyahu, who met with the Sudanese leader General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan in Uganda on 3.2.2020.<sup>65</sup> With the Trump administration acting as mediator, contact between Israeli and Sudanese government officials continued under both Al-Burhan and caretaker Prime Minister Abdullah Hamduk. The most significant development in Israel-Sudan relations is the decision taken on 23.3.2021 by the

<sup>62</sup> Times of Israel, "Lapid, Blinken visit Ben Gurion's grave at Sde Boker", 28.3.2022 [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/lapid-blinken-visit-ben-gurions-grave-at-sde-boker](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/lapid-blinken-visit-ben-gurions-grave-at-sde-boker)

<sup>63</sup> At the end of the first I2U2 meeting, the governments of the US, India, Israel and the UAE issued the following joint statement: [https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/news/event\\_virtual\\_meeting140722/he/I2U2\\_Summit\\_Communique\\_-\\_14\\_July\\_2022\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/news/event_virtual_meeting140722/he/I2U2_Summit_Communique_-_14_July_2022_Final.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> WAM, "UAE, Jordan and Israel collaborate to mitigate climate change with sustainability project", 22.11.2021

<https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302995503#:~:text=DUBAI, 22nd November, 2021, water security in the region>

<sup>65</sup> State of Israel, Prime Minister's Office, Press Release, "PM Netanyahu and Chairman of the Sovereign Council of Sudan, Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, met today in Entebbe, Uganda, on the invitation of Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni", 3.2.2020 [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/evebt\\_meeting030220](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/evebt_meeting030220)

*Israel-Sudan:  
the unfinished  
Abraham  
Accord.*

government in Khartoum to confiscate assets and nationalise private companies that have allegedly benefitted Hamas financially, aiming in this way to declare through its actions that Sudan is cutting all ties with international terrorism.<sup>66</sup> However, the current government, which has been in control of the country since General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan staged a military coup on 25.10.2021, is reportedly not in total control of the nation's domestic political situation; this prevents it from proceeding with the normalisation of its relations with Israel. Such a development is likely to intensify the existing political clashes within the country, which stem from the antagonism between the military establishment represented by Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan and the political faction of Abdullah Hamduk, although both—when they held the reins of power—had shown themselves willing to promote the normalisation of Sudan's relations with Israel. Due to the volatility that has characterised the Sudanese political reality in recent years, the process of normalising Sudan-Israel relations, the foundations for which was laid by the Sudan-US joint statement of 6.1.2021, have yet to be built upon.<sup>67</sup>

*Israel-Oman:  
maintaining  
distances for  
reasons of  
neutrality.*

Bilateral relations between Israel and Oman remain extraordinary, typified by behind-the-scenes contact between the late Sultan Qaboos and Israeli government officials. In terms of the normalisation of the countries' bilateral diplomatic relations, no major developments have been noted since Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to the Omani capital Muscat on 25.10.2018,<sup>68</sup> the first official visit made by an Israeli Prime Minister to the Sultanate, apart from the presence of the Omani Ambassador to the US at the official ceremony at which the 'Trump Plan' was announced at the White House on 28.1.2020.<sup>69</sup> Sultan Qaboos had passed away a few days earlier, and the current Sultan of the country, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, would not undertake his duties until 11.1.2020. Oman's new political leadership does not intend to disrupt the country's traditionally neutral foreign policy, whose main aim is maintaining an equal distance between Shiite Iran and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia. The need to defend the special arrangement governing the Straits of Hormuz to facilitate unhindered international navigation to and from the Persian Gulf requires the Sultanate's foreign policy to refrain from any excesses and to keep channels of communication open with Tehran, Riyadh and the other Sunni monarchies in the region. Indicative of Oman's unchanging commitment to maintaining its neutrality is its refusal to date to allow Israeli airlines to enter its airspace, and thus to avoid giving the impression that it is normalising its relations with Israel in any way—despite the repeated efforts of both the Netanyahu and Bennett-Lapid administrations. Indicative of Tehran's interest in Oman's decision to keep its distance from Israel are comments made in the Iranian media deploring the attitude of those nations in the region that had signed the Abraham Accords.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, Saudi Arabia, although it has made repeated official statements to the effect that it will not normalise its diplomatic relations with Israel unless the Palestinian issue is resolved first, announced on 15.7.2022 that it would henceforth be

<sup>66</sup> Mai Abu Hasaneen, "Sudan confiscates Hamas assets", 30.9.2021 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/sudan-confiscates-hamas-assets> A historical review of the course of Sudan-Hamas relations.

<sup>67</sup> On 6.1.2021, Sudan's Minister for Justice at the time, Nasredeen Abdulbari, representing the Sudanese government, and the US Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, who was specifically appointed for the purpose, signed a joint statement in which the Sudanese side accepted the principles that underpin the Abraham Accords. This document laid the foundations which allowed the process that will bring about a gradual normalisation in Sudan-Israel relations to begin; this process remains incomplete at the time of writing. The joint written statement made by Abdulbari and Mnuchin, as posted on the official website of the State Department: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Sudan-AA.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> On Israeli-Omani behind-the-scenes dealings during the reign of Sultan Qaboos. Indicatively: Elie Podeh, "Israel's renewed affair with Oman", MITVIM, 8.11.2018 <https://mitvim.org.il/en/publication/israels-renewed-affair-with-oman>

<sup>69</sup> The ceremony was also attended by the ambassadors of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain accredited to Washington at the time. See The Jerusalem Post, "Bahrain, UAE, Oman envoys at White House unveiling of Trump peace deal", 29.1.2020 <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Bahrain-UAE-envoys-come-to-White-House-for-Trump-Deal-of-the-Century-615706>

<sup>70</sup> PressTV, "Oman refusing to open airspace to Israeli flights, unlike Saudis: Reports", 11.8.2022

<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/08/11/687179/Oman-reportedly-denies-airspace-access-to-Israeli-flights>

Indicative of Tehran's interest in this issue is the related commentary on the English-language Iranian news network PressTV

allowing Israeli airlines to cross Saudi airspace.<sup>71</sup> The announcement coincided with the flight taking US President Joe Biden from Tel Aviv to Jeddah airport.

*Israel-Mauritania: the government wants to, but the opposition reacts.*

Relations between Israel and Mauritania also reportedly remain stable. Although a full member of the Arab League, Mauritania maintained full diplomatic relations with Israel until 2009, when it was forced to break them off under pressure from the Arab League's other member states following Israel's bombing of Gaza in that year. Nouakchott welcomed the signing of the first Abraham Accord between Israel and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>72</sup> One might have expected Mauritania to have already restored bilateral relations with Israel, given that just a few months later, Morocco, on which the government of Nouakchott is dependent,<sup>73</sup> recommended that full diplomatic relations be instituted with Israel. However, political forces in Mauritania oppose such an eventuality, with some politicians even proposing that any moves towards political rapprochement with Israel, while the Palestinian issue remains unresolved, should be criminalised.<sup>74</sup>

*Israel-Chad: stasis due to internal instability.*

Israel's relations with Chad, the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa, which maintained full diplomatic relations with Israel between 1961 and 1972, during which time the two nations developed significant military and economic ties, is another special case. In November 2018, the Chadian President Idriss Déby visited Israel.<sup>75</sup> Two months later, on 20.1.2019, Benjamin Netanyahu visited N'Djamena, restoring bilateral diplomatic relations.<sup>76</sup> However, Déby would be killed on 20.4.2021 in unclear circumstances in a part of northern Chad where government forces has been engaged in a long-term armed confrontation with rebel groups<sup>77</sup>. As a result, the process of restoring bilateral relations was not completed. Since then, Chad has been ruled by the former president's son, Mahamat Déby, who was appointed head of the country's Transitional Military Council. Chad's current internal political instability justifies the stasis in developing bilateral relations with Israel further.<sup>78</sup>

*The unresolved Palestinian issue is preventing an expansion of the Abraham Accords.*

Apart from the specific factors facing the individual governments of the countries mentioned above at the domestic and regional level, the lack of progress in the Palestinian peace process remains of critical importance across the board. Both the Netanyahu administration and the current Bennett-Lapid government have exploited regional and international circumstances in a manner that means the resolution of the Palestinian issue is no longer a necessary

<sup>71</sup> CNN, "Saudi Arabia opens airspace to Israeli flights", 25.7.2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/15/middleeast/saudi-arabia-israeli-airlines-airspace-biden-intl/index.html>

<sup>72</sup> The Mauritanian government commented positively on the signing of the first Abraham Accord between Israel and the UAE. The state-owned Emirati news agency WAM carried a statement by a Mauritanian Foreign Ministry official, according to which: "The UAE possesses absolute sovereignty and complete independence in conducting its relations and assessing the positions it takes in accordance with its national interest and the interests of Arabs and Muslims". Cf. Reuters, "Mauritania supports 'good judgment' of UAE leadership on Israel accord-WAM", 16.8.2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-mauritania-idUSKCN25C09M>

<sup>73</sup> Mauritania's about turn on the POLISARIO movement in Western Sahara has strengthened its ties with Morocco. Indicatively: Jamal Laadam, "Beyond the friendship diplomacy between Morocco and Mauritania", *Modern Diplomacy*, 2.3.2021 <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/03/02/beyond-the-friendship-diplomacy-between-morocco-and-mauritania>

<sup>74</sup> Middle East Monitor, "Mauritanian MPs call for criminalizing normalization with Israel", 6.1.2021 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210106-mauritania-mps-call-for-criminalising-normalisation-with-israel>

<sup>75</sup> On the bilateral relations between Israel and Chad, see Gabriel Haritos, "Η επιστροφή του Ισραήλ στην Αφρική" [*Israel's return to Africa*], *Foreign Affairs--The Hellenic Edition*, 29.11.2018 <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/72071/gabriil-xaritos/i-epistroti-toy-israil-stin-afriki>

<sup>76</sup> State of Israel, Prime Minister's Office, Press Release, "PM Netanyahu and Chad President Idriss Deby announce the resumption of diplomatic relations between Chad and Israel", 20.1.2019 [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event\\_diplomatic\\_relations200119](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_diplomatic_relations200119) At the meeting, it was agreed that an MoU would be signed allowing for the resumption of bilateral diplomatic relations.

<sup>77</sup> On the domestic political equilibria and regional presence which hinged on the role of former President of Chad, Idriss Déby, see. Alexandre Marc, "The death of Chadian President Idriss Déby itno threatens stability in the region", *Brookings*, 29.4.2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/29/the-death-of-chadian-president-idriss-deby-itno-threatens-stability-in-the-region>

<sup>78</sup> Bloody mass demonstrations against the Mahamat Déby's rule were reported to have taken place on 20.10.2022. Cf. France24, "At least 50 people killed in Chad protests, UN urges probe", 20.10.2022 <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221020-chad-police-clash-with-protesters-killing-at-least-five>



precondition for Israel to forge connections with other nations in the region. It does still make some Arab countries reluctant to normalise their relations with Israel, however, which is why they continue to make the resolution of the Palestinian issue a prerequisite for normalisation, along with the declaration of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

This stance was expressed first by the Kuwaiti government, which declared that "it will be the last country to sign an 'Abraham Accord', a position that can be attributed primarily to the powerful Palestinian community in that country and to public opinion in Kuwait.<sup>79</sup> Tunisia's reaction was also negative.<sup>80</sup> The nation has been going through a period of political instability over the last two years and does not want to have to deal with additional issues, especially those with the potential to create further political conflict in the country.<sup>81</sup> Finally, Algeria also criticised the signing of the Abraham Accords, clearly adopting the position of the Palestinian leadership and the Authority's President, Mahmoud Abbas.<sup>82</sup> Algeria's stance is not based entirely on ideological criteria. The country is also concerned about the military and diplomatic strengthening of its neighbour, Morocco, whose sovereignty over Western Sahara the Trump administration recognised,<sup>83</sup> so that the government in Rabat would normalise its relations with Israel. Washington has seemed interested in improving its relations with Algeria<sup>84</sup> since the Biden administration took over. However, the Algerian government has not changed its stance on the issue of normalising its relations with Israel and has put the Palestinian issue high on its political agenda, with President Abdelmadjid Tebboune leading an effort to reconcile Palestine's rival political factions. A recent development that is indicative of the policy of the Tebboune government was the round of negotiations it hosted in Algiers on 12-13.10.2022. With twelve Palestinian organisations and political factions participating, including Fatah and Hamas, the aim was to achieve national unity.<sup>85</sup>

*Kuwait,  
Tunisia and  
Algeria at the  
Palestinians'  
side.*

<sup>79</sup> On the position adopted by the Kuwaiti government towards the 'Abraham Accords', see Fatiha Dazi-Heni, "The Gulf States and Israel after the Abraham Accords", Arab Reform Initiative, 6.11.2020 <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-gulf-states-and-israel-after-the-abraham-accords>

<sup>80</sup> On 22.12.2020, the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement which clarified that it "respects the decisions of other states", but nonetheless "maintains a principled stance that will remain impervious to changes on the international political scene". On 9.6.2022, Tunisia made a similar declaration. On 12.10.2019, when the nation's serving President, Kais Saied, was asked during a pre-election TV debate about his intentions with regard to the possibility of Tunisia joining the group of Arab countries that had signed the Abraham Accords, he described the establishment of any relations with Israel as "an act of high treason". Cf. a) Reuters, "Tunisia says it does not intend to normalize relations with Israel", 22.12.2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/tunisia-israel-int-idUSKBN28W2FL> b) Xinhua, "Tunisia denies having talks with Israel to normalize ties", 9.6.2022 <https://english.news.cn/africa/20220610/4a3d6c2cbdf4fffa3b33f87d17edd21/c.html> c) MEMRITV, "Tunisian presidential candidate Kais Saied: Normalization of relations with Israel constitutes treason; Opponent Nabil Karoui: I support constitutional criminalization of such normalization", 12.10.2019 <https://www.memri.org/tv/tunisian-presidential-debate-kais-saied-nabil-karoui-israel-normalization-treason>

<sup>81</sup> Indicatively: Sharan Grewal, Salah-Dean Satouri, Ian DeHaven, "Tunisia's new constitution will only worsen its political crisis", 6.7.2022 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/07/06/tunisias-new-constitution-will-only-worsen-its-political-crisis>

<sup>82</sup> The statements made by Tunisia's President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, on 26.9.2022 are indicative of the Algerian government's position on the Palestinian issue and, by extension, on the Abraham Accords: "We cannot tolerate the occupation of Palestine. We will continue to support Palestine, even if it remains occupied by the most powerful international superpower. Palestine belongs to the Palestinians. We fought against the occupation and we cannot accept another country remaining occupied. We will fight occupation anywhere and everywhere." Cf. Middle East Monitor, "Tebboune: Palestine is 'national issue' for Algeria", 26.9.2022 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220926-tebboune-palestine-is-national-issue-for-algeria>

<sup>83</sup> On the crisis in Algerian-Moroccan bilateral relations and how this relates to the Abraham Accords, the improvement in Moroccan-US bilateral relations, and the Trump administration's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara, cf. Rina Basist, "Algeria partly blames Israel in decision to cut ties with Morocco", Al-Monitor, 25.8.2021 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/algeria-partly-blames-israel-decision-cut-ties-morocco>

<sup>84</sup> US Secretary of State Antony Blinken paid an official visit to Algeria on 26-30.3.2022 in an effort to revitalize their bilateral relations. See U.S. Department of State, Remarks, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune before their meeting", 30.3.2022 <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-algerian-president-abdelmadjid-tebboune-before-their-meeting> Transcript of the joint statements issued by Tebboune and Blinken.

<sup>85</sup> On the results of the intra-Palestinian consultations in Algiers on 12-13.10.2022, see Al Jazeera, "Palestinian factions sign reconciliation agreement in Algeria", 13.10.2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/13/palestinian-factions-sign-reconciliation-agreement-in-algeria>

*Israel-Qatar:  
a long and  
distant  
relationship.*

On the other hand, relations between Israel and Qatar remain interesting. Although there have been no indications that Doha intends to sign another Abraham Accord, Qatar has been on hand for a decade now, along and in collaboration with Egypt, whenever the need has arisen for mediation between Israel and Hamas.<sup>86</sup> The fact that the leader of Hamas' political arm, Ismail Haniyeh, has been resident in Qatar for years is a major obstacle to the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Israel. It would be unwise to interpret the decision of the Qatari government to allow Israeli journalists and football fans to travel to the country to watch the World Cup as a 'sign of political openness', given that it did so on the recommendation of the international football federation (FIFA) that organises the event and was not an initiative that stemmed from the Qatari political leadership itself.<sup>87</sup>

## Restoration of relations between Israel and Turkey

*The new  
Bennett-Lapid  
government  
understands  
that the  
diplomatic  
crisis with  
Turkey must  
end.*

Turkish-Israeli relations have a long history and have defined key pillars of Israel's regional policy since the early 1950s. Turkey was the first Muslim country in the region to recognise Israel de jure, and the country was viewed for decades by Israeli decision-makers as its primary 'security shield' against regional threats. However, since the Mavi Marmara incident in late May 2010 and throughout Netanyahu's tenure as Prime Minister, the nations' bilateral political relations deteriorated, their diplomatic representation was downgraded, and occasionally inflammatory statements by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticised Israeli policy at both the domestic and regional level. Over the years, Turkey has come to be perceived by Israeli public opinion as a hostile country. At the same time, Ankara has allowed Hamas to maintain a delegation in Istanbul,<sup>88</sup> a development that has been repeatedly denounced by Israel.

Nevertheless, the new Bennett-Lapid government which took office on 13 June 2021, realised that the diplomatic crisis with Turkey had somehow to be brought to an end, and that certain

<sup>86</sup> Indicatively: a) Yoel Guzansky, Ofir Winter, "Two are better than One: The role of Qatar and Egypt in Gaza", INSS Insight No.1636, 25.8.2022 <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/qatar-egypt> Aspects of the regional cooperation between Qatar and Egypt in the light of their joint effort to mediate a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Islamic Jihad in August 2022

b) Shlomo Roltter Jesner, "Qatar is using the Palestinians to assert its regional influence", Foreign Policy, 26.1.2021 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/26/qatar-is-using-the-palestinians-to-assert-its-regional-influence>

c) Michal Yaari, "Israel and Qatar: Relations nurtured by the Palestinian issue", MITVIM, March 2020 [https://mitvim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/Dr. Michal Yaari - Israel and Qatar - Relations nurtured by the Palestinian issue - March 2020-1.pdf](https://mitvim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/Dr._Michal_Yaari_-_Israel_and_Qatar_-_Relations_nurtured_by_the_Palestinian_issue_-_March_2020-1.pdf)

Cf. Sultan Barakat, "Qatari Mediation: Sultan Barakat, "Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement", Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, No.12, November 2014 <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Final-PDF-English.pdf> The ideological background of international mediation as a tool in Qatari foreign policy.

<sup>87</sup> Reuters, "Israelis to be allowed into Qatar for World Cup, officials say", 9.6.2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israelis-be-allowed-into-qatar-world-cup-officials-say-2022-06-09>

<sup>88</sup> Over the past decade, the Israeli side has repeatedly made public evidence which it claims proves that members of the Hamas delegation in Istanbul are responsible for recruiting, funding and coordinating the cells that carry out armed attacks against Israeli targets within Israel and in the West Bank. The organisation's offices in Turkey most probably became operational in 2011. However, the Israeli private television broadcaster "Channel 2" reported in late January 2012 that Hamas was considering opening offices in the country, following statements to that effect by the then President of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, in the *Hürriyet* newspaper. Indicatively: a) Mako, "Ha'bait ha'khadash she Khamas: Be-Turkia?" ["Hamas' new home: In Turkey?"], 30.1.2012 <https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/Arab/Article-397ec638b8d2531018.htm> According to the news report broadcast by Israel's Channel 2 on 30.1.2012: "In recent weeks, the Hamas leadership has been searching for a new 'home', due to its break with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Qatar and Jordan are reportedly among the leading candidates to host the Gaza terrorist organisation. But now it appears that Turkey is also considering allowing Khaled Mashal and his associates to settle on its territory". b) Shlomi Eldar, "Is Erdogan closing Hamas' Istanbul office?", Al-Monitor, 21.12.2015 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/12/hamas-kaled-meshaal-salah-ak-arouri-istanbul-reconciliation.html> c) Nadav Shragai, "Hamas' Istanbul headquarters has directed hundreds of terror attacks against Israelis and laundered millions of dollars", Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 30.12.2021 <https://jcpa.org/article/hamas-istanbul-headquarters-has-directed-hundreds-of-terror-attacks-against-israelis-and-laundered-millions-of-dollars> d) Israel Security Agency ("Shabak"), "Hamas operations in Turkey", 24.2.2018 <https://www.shabak.gov.il/english/publications/pages/hamas-operations-in-turkey.aspx> The report mentions cases of Hamas cells active in the West Bank maintaining contacts with the Hamas delegation in Turkey.

conditions were in place that would allow meaningful channels of communication with Ankara to be reopened.

*Economic crisis forces Turkey to seek regional partners.*

Specifically, the deep economic crisis in Turkey had forced it to seek regional partners. The improvement in Turkey's relations with the United Arab Emirates, brought about so problems facing the Turkish economy could be better addressed, was an important indication of a shift in President Erdogan's policy towards restoring his country's relations with other states that had maintained close ties with Saudi Arabia.<sup>89</sup> Similar Turkish moves designed to bring about a rapprochement with Egypt were noted in August 2021.<sup>90</sup>

*The turbulent May of 2021.*

*A new front for Israel: Jewish-Arab clashes in its mixed cities.*

On the other hand, exactly one month before the new Bennett-Lapid government was formed, Israel found itself confronted by an unprecedented situation. The decision by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to indefinitely postpone the parliamentary and presidential elections due to be held in May and July respectively, the first elections to be held after a gap of 15 years, triggered massive anti-Israel demonstrations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This was because the Palestinian government had cited the Netanyahu government's refusal to allow the Arab population of Jerusalem to participate in the electoral process as its reason for postponing the elections.<sup>91</sup> What's more, there were indications at this same time that, due to the discontent expressed with the ruling Fatah faction, Hamas' influence in the West Bank was on the rise, to the extent that it could even emerge victorious in the upcoming elections—which were ultimately postponed until further notice.<sup>92</sup> The intensity of the demonstrations caused the Israel-Gaza front to flare up once again. But apart from the usual rockets launched at Israeli cities, which retaliated with air raids by the Israeli air force, there were also fierce clashes in many Israeli cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations—cities which had until recently been considered models of peaceful coexistence.<sup>93</sup> Hostilities between Jews and Arabs took place in Jerusalem, but also in the once peaceful neighbourhoods of the mixed cities of Lod, Acre, Ramle, Jaffa and Haifa, while Hamas and Islamic Jihad continued to launch rockets at major Israeli urban centres.

<sup>89</sup> Gökhan Demirtaş, Hasim Tekines, "Mapping changes in Turkish-UAE relations: A matter of diplomacy", The Washington Institute, 27 August 2021 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-changes-turkish-uae-relations-matter-diplomacy> The background to Turkey and the UAE's regional approach.

<sup>90</sup> Motasem Dalloul, "There are limits to the rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt", 14.9.2021

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210914-there-are-limits-to-the-rapprochement-between-turkey-and-egypt> On the rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt which was noted in early September 2021

<sup>91</sup> Adnan Abu Amer, "Postponed Palestinian Elections: Causes and Repercussions", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11.5.2021

<https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84509> An assessment of the intra-Palestinian and regional balances that led to the decision by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to postpone the staging of the Palestinian parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2021.

<sup>92</sup> On the eve of the Palestinian parliamentary elections in May, doubts were expressed as to how President Abbas's government would deal with possible defeat by the Fatah faction. Indicatively: a) Omar Rahman, "Elections in Palestine: Prelude or ploy?", Brookings, 24 February 2021

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/24/elections-in-palestine-prelude-or-ploy> b) Ghaith Al-Omari, "If Palestinian Elections proceed, Hamas may have the upper hand", The Washington Institute, 25.3.2021 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/if-palestinian-elections-proceed-hamas-may-have-upper-hand>.

However, when student elections were held at Ramallah's Birzeit University in May 2022, the first after a two-year suspension due to the pandemic, the Hamas faction won 28 of the 51 seats, while the Fatah-backed faction won just 18. Similar political trends were observed in a poll conducted in June 2022, one month after the student elections at Birzeit University. Cf. a) Birzeit University, "Birzeit University to hold Student Council elections on may 18 after two-years pause", 7.4.2022

<https://www.birzeit.edu/en/news/birzeit-university-hold-student-council-elections-may-18-after-two-year-pause> b) France24, "Hamas students celebrate West Bank university poll win", 19.5.2022 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220519-hamas-students-celebrate-west-bank-university-poll-win> c) Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research - PSR, "Press Release: Public Opinion Poll No (84)", 28.6.2022 <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/910>

<sup>93</sup> See a) Ephraim Lavie, Meir Elran, Ilham Shahbari, Khadere Sawaed, Jony Essa, "Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, April-May 2021", INSS Insight No.1474, 31.5.2021 <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/arabs-and-jews-in-israel> b) Doron Matza, "The May 2021 riots and their implications", BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2.067, 8.6.2021 <https://besacenter.org/israel-may-2021-riots>

*The risk of Erdogan's inflammatory rhetoric encouraging ethnic conflict within Israel.*

In the midst of this emergency, President Erdogan made public statements denouncing Israel for its policy towards the Palestinians.<sup>94</sup> His interventions reinforced Hamas's rhetoric in the West Bank communicatively and fuelled tensions between Jewish and Arab Israelis, but also between the ruling Fatah and opposition Hamas factions in the Palestinian Authority. Therefore, in addition to the other issues that had been ratcheting up the tension in Turkish-Israeli relations for years (from the Mavi Marmara incident through to the strengthening of Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus), the Turkish President's occasional interventions had the capacity to cause a more generalized destabilization which Israel would probably find it hard to bring under control domestically. Relations between the Jewish majority and Arab minority were put under the microscope of political life; in retrospect, it seems clear that the support of the Arab Islamist "Ra'am" party for the newly-formed government led by Bennett and Lapid was extremely useful in mollifying tensions between Israel's Jewish and Arab communities. Taking these additional factors into account, it was clear the Bennett-Lapid administration had to try to reduce the chronic tension in Israel's relations with the Presidential Palace in Ankara.

However, Israeli diplomacy had first to provide an answer to the following question: which Israeli politician was in a position to take the first step towards re-engaging with the Turkish leadership?

The new Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was effectively barred by his right-wing national-religious background.<sup>95</sup> Any initiative on Bennett's part would further expose him before his right-wing voters, who were already expressing their disappointment at his choosing to join the centre-left political camp in criticising Netanyahu. The newly-appointed Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, and Defence Minister, Benny Gantz, were hardly better suited to for the task. At a protest co-organised by the parties led by Lapid and Gantz in Tel Aviv in May 2019, the demonstrators wore Turkish fezzes and held placards with photos of the Turkish President whom they likened to Netanyahu as the "Erdogan of Israel"; they also accused both leaders of authoritarianism and nepotism.<sup>96</sup>

*President Isaac Herzog on his role as mediator between Israel and Turkey.*

The solution was provided by the election of the new Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, on 7 July 2021. In consultation with the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the diplomatic office of the new Israeli President used appropriate channels in Ankara; the result: the President of Turkey contacted the newly appointed Isaac Herzog by phone. The pretext was to congratulate him on his recent election, but when the conversation lasted longer than expected, it prompted a range of comments in the Israeli media.<sup>97</sup> This in turn served to begin accustoming the public in both countries to the idea that "something was about to change in Turkish-Israeli relations".

This handling of the communicational aspect by the new Israeli government proved successful, as there was no significant negative reactions from the Opposition. The personality of Isaac

<sup>94</sup> Indicatively: a) Reuters, "Turkey's Erdogan calls Israel 'terror state' over Palestinian clashes at Al-Aqsa", 8.5.2021

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-accuses-israel-terror-over-palestinian-clashes-at-al-aqsa-2021-05-08> b) Reuters, "In Turkey, protests against Israel over surge in violence", 11.5.2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-protests-against-israel-over-surge-violence-2021-05-10>

<sup>95</sup> For example, as an MK with the right-wing religious party "Jewish Home - Ha'Bayt ha'ihudi" in 2013, Naftali Bennett had responded to Erdogan's statements equating Zionism to fascism by saying that "the only reaction to anyone who argues against Zionism is battle". Cf. Arutz 7 Israel National News, "Bennett on Erdogan: The answer is to fight", 1.3.2013 <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/165761>

<sup>96</sup> i24News, "Thousands protest in Tel Aviv against Netanyahu immunity law", 25.5.2019 <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/1558808140-thousands-protest-in-tel-aviv-against-netanyahu-s-override-law>

<sup>97</sup> Indicatively: a) The Jerusalem Post, "Israel's Herzog, Turkey's Erdogan hold 40-minute phone call", 13.7.2021 <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/israels-herzog-turkeys-erdogan-hold-40-min-phone-call-673675> b) Zvi Bar'El, "Erdogan is on the line. Bennett should pick up the phone", HaAretz, 14.7.2021 <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2021-07-14/ty-article/.premium/erdogan-is-on-the-line-bennett-should-pick-up-the-phone/0000017f-db6d-d3a5-af7f-fbefe52c0000> c) Hurriyet Daily News, "President Erdogan, Israel's Herzog talk over phone", 8.7.2021 <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-israels-herzog-talk-over-phone-175191>



Herzog helped here, too: despite his wide-ranging experiences in Israeli political life, for the three years between 2018 and 2021, he distanced himself from ongoing political clashes and quietly went about his duties as Chairman of the Jewish Agency, a non-partisan public institution responsible for the settlement in Israel of Diaspora. As a result, the past cast no shadows between Herzog and Erdogan; on a purely communicative level, too, neither side gave the impression that it had 'given in' to the other. In this elegant way, Israeli diplomacy, in collaboration with Turkish diplomacy, found a way to open a new channel of communication between the presidential palaces of Ankara and Jerusalem, "consciously bypassing" Bennett and Lapid, who observed developments in near silence.

Within six months, the Turkish side had had adequate time to tone down its anti-Israel rhetoric. In parallel, the Israeli side was urged not to disrupt its good relations with Greece and Cyprus, which were observing developments with interest. Once again, the Israeli government chose to remain on the sidelines, allowing President Herzog to play the leading role. To maintain the necessary balances, once it became known that Herzog's visit to Ankara had been set for 9.3.2022, the Israeli President made successive official visits to Athens and Nicosia before this, on 24.2.2022 and 2.3.2022 respectively.<sup>98</sup>

*The Bennett-Lapid government revealed the importance of communication management in improving relations with Turkey.*

Apart from the statements required by protocol, during their meeting in Ankara Herzog and Erdogan announced the establishment of a 'joint crisis management framework' to be activated between the Israeli and Turkish foreign ministries whenever developments arose with a capacity to disrupt bilateral relations. The details of this framework would be worked out "in the coming months" at a meeting between Foreign Ministers Cavosuglu and Lapid which was already being scheduled. This special 'crisis management framework' between Ankara and Jerusalem was a significant innovation in the way Israeli foreign policy is conducted.<sup>99</sup>

The Bennett-Lapid government attached importance to managing the communicative aspect of these developments so that the Israeli public would not be left with the impression that Erdogan's long-standing critical stance on Israel, which often bordered on anti-Semitism, was being addressed by means of appeasement tactics. Since the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, and throughout the years that followed, the stand-off with Turkey has been identified in Israel with the figure of the Turkish President. Erdogan did not even become more likeable when, in November 2021, he was said to have personally mediated the release of two Israeli tourists by the Turkish secret services, who were interrogating them on suspicion of espionage. This event provided the occasion for the first telephone conversation between Bennett and Erdogan.<sup>100</sup>

Everything indicated that the reappointment of the Turkish ambassador to Tel Aviv would be announced during Mevlut Cavusoglu's visit to Israel on 25 May 2022. However, the information leaked to the Press proved inaccurate.<sup>101</sup> The Israeli government was waiting for tangible proof that Turkey would stop hosting the Hamas delegation in Istanbul, members of

<sup>98</sup> The Times of Israel, "Meeting Greek leaders in Athens, Herzog stops short of criticizing Russia on Ukraine", 25.2.2022 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/meeting-greek-leaders-in-athens-herzog-stops-short-of-criticizing-russia-on-ukraine> Herzog's visit to Athens on 24.2.2022 coincided with the start of the war in Ukraine and did not receive significant media coverage.

<sup>99</sup> Indicatively: a) Times of Israel, "Herzog, Erdogan discuss creating mechanism for solving possible spats in the future", 9.3.2022

[https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/herzog-erdogan-discuss-creating-mechanism-for-solving-possible-spats-in-the-future](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/herzog-erdogan-discuss-creating-mechanism-for-solving-possible-spats-in-the-future) b)

WallaNews, "Beikvot bikur Herzog: Israel ve-Turkia ikayemu manganon li-mniat masbherim ba-yakhasim" ["Following Herzog's visit, Israel and Turkey to set up crisis prevention mechanism in bilateral relations"], 10.3.2022 <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3493821>

<sup>100</sup> The Times of Israel, "Bennett thanks Erdogan for releasing Israeli couple, in first-ever call between them", 18.11.2021

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-thanks-erdogan-for-releasing-israeli-couple-in-first-ever-call-between-them>

<sup>101</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "FM Lapid meets Turkish FM Cavusoglu in Jerusalem", 25.5.2022

<https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/fm-lapid-meets-with-turkish-fm-cavusoglu-25-may-2022> No mention was made of a timeframe for the reappointment of ambassadors

which were allegedly involved in financing and recruiting Palestinians who had carried out armed attacks against Israeli targets in the West Bank and Jerusalem; this confirms the assessment made above that the new factor that had pushed the Israeli side to promote the normalisation of its relations with Turkey was actually Ankara's links with Hamas at a time when the faction's influence seemed to be growing in Palestinian society. It was clear that the Israeli government was not yet convinced that ties between Ankara and Gaza were being downgraded, despite the fact that during the Turkish Foreign Minister's visit to Ramallah, the Joint Working Committee of the Foreign Ministries of Turkey and the Palestinian Authority had met for the first time in 12 years—a development which indicated that Turkey's relations with Fatah were growing stronger.<sup>102</sup>

*Israel demands the removal of the Hamas delegation from Istanbul.*

When, in June 2022, the close coordination between the Israeli and Turkish intelligence services was made public in the local media after it succeeded in preventing a series of terrorist attacks against Israeli tourists in Istanbul at the last moment and had pointed the finger at Iranian assassins, agents of the Revolutionary Guards, as the wanted perpetrators. The close cooperation between Mossad and MIT was warmly praised by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who seized the opportunity presented by this joint success to visit Ankara.<sup>103</sup>

The most important legacy of the Bennett-Lapid administration in terms of Turkish-Israeli relations is the full restoration of bilateral diplomatic ties through the mutual reappointment of ambassadors, which was announced on 17.8.2022.<sup>104</sup>

*Israel-Turkey diplomatic relations fully normalised on 17.8.2022.*

Given that a delay in forming the new government is considered likely, Lapid's caretaker government is expected to promote relations with Turkey still further. It is indicative that Defence Minister Benny Gantz made a working visit to Turkey on 26.10.2022, just five days before Israel went to the polls on 1 November 2022. The visit, the first to the Turkish capital by an Israeli Defence Minister in ten years, included meetings with his counterpart, Hulusi Akar, and the head of the country's intelligence services, Hakan Fidan.<sup>105</sup>

*It is expected that the Lapid government will promote the further strengthening of relations with Ankara after the November 1 elections, through until the new government has been formed.*

## Israel-Lebanon maritime delimitation agreement

Two weeks before the elections of 1 November 2022, thanks to US mediation, Yair Lapid's caretaker government achieved a final positive outcome in its indirect negotiations with Lebanon over the mutual definition of the nations' maritime border. Apart from resolving a decade-old disagreement, the timing forced both countries to come to an agreement. On the one hand, for the Lebanese, developing the Qana field is perhaps the only opportunity for their economy to grow, although the quantity and quality of gas in the field is still unknown. The constructive attitude of President Michel Aoun just a few days before the end of his term in office is unlikely to be matched by any of his successors. On the other side, the Israelis were under pressure from binding timetables requiring an immediate start to the extraction of gas from the adjoining Karish field. If no agreement was reached, quite apart from the risks posed by Hezbollah's threats to launch drone and rocket attacks on the Israeli platform unless

<sup>102</sup> Anadolu Agency, "Turkish foreign minister arrives in Palestine", 24.5.2022 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-arrives-in-palestine/2596161>

<sup>103</sup> Rina Basist, "Israel's FM makes first visit to Turkey, focused on security cooperation", Al-Monitor, 23.6.2022 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/israels-fm-lapid-makes-first-visit-turkey-focused-security-cooperation>

<sup>104</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "Israel and Türkiye restore full diplomatic ties", 17.8.2022 <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/israel-and-turkiye-restore-full-diplomatic-ties-17-aug-2022>

<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Lis, "Israel's Gantz scheduled to meet Turkish Defense minister in Ankara", HaAretz, 20.10.2022 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-10-20/ty-article/.premium/israels-gantz-scheduled-to-meet-turkish-defense-minister-in-ankara/00000183-f66e-dd9c-af97-fee9a180000>

*For now, the Israel-Lebanon maritime delimitation agreement is not an 'Abraham Accord, it is a legacy for the future'.*

Lebanon's rights in the disputed maritime zone were not ensured beforehand, Israel would lose its credibility on international markets.<sup>106</sup>

The originality of the Israel-Lebanon agreement lies in the fact that it was reached between two countries that have no diplomatic relations, and are actually at war with each other. Lebanon's decision to formally recognise the status quo of the 5 km maritime boundary line unilaterally declared by Israel when it withdrew from South Lebanon in 2000, serves as a de facto fixed reference point that may be included in a comprehensive framework for a bilateral agreement at some point in the future.<sup>107</sup>

## Israel-Greece-Cyprus relations

*The Bennett-Lapid government has also maintained good relations with Greece and Cyprus.*

On a practical and institutional level, the foundations of regional cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus were laid during the long Netanyahu prime ministership. From 2010 on, the Israeli side has cooperated with every administration in Athens and Nicosia as the political parties in those two nations formed alternating government. There was no comparable alternation in Israel itself, however, since the Netanyahu faction formed the backbone of each successive coalition government, with the Israeli Prime Minister retaining a special role for himself in managing his country's international relations. The formation of the new Bennett-Lapid administration on 13 June 2021 marked a new era in Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus, which would most probably be accompanied by a change in the Israeli mindset when it came to managing its relations at the regional and bilateral level. In this sense, Greek and Cypriot interest was intense.

*Athens and Nicosia have been tolerant of Israel's improved relations with Turkey.*

Athens and Nicosia were aware that the new Israeli coalition would be keen to prove both to the Israeli public and—above all—to itself that it too was capable of improving Israel's relations with its neighbours. The Netanyahu administration had begun several promising new chapters with the Abraham Accords. At the same time, however, Israel's relations with Turkey (and, secondarily, with Jordan) had been growing increasingly problematic since 2010. It was therefore only natural that the new Foreign Minister and current caretaker Prime Minister, Yair Lapid, would want to try and improve his country's relations with Ankara and Amman in order to 'correct' the mistakes made during the long rule of his predecessor and political rival.

The revival of Israel-Turkey relations did not therefore take Greece and Cyprus by surprise; after all, no diplomatic crisis lasts forever. It was known that, despite the long-term intense political differences between Ankara and Jerusalem, their economic relations went from strength to strength after 2010.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the communication between the two countries' security services focusing on the detection of extreme Islamist terrorist cells was never interrupted.<sup>109</sup> In addition, Ankara's considerable influence over events in Syria, along with its

<sup>106</sup> On the negotiation process between Israel and Lebanon for the final delimitation of their maritime zones see a) Gabriel Haritos, "Ανάλυση: Η θαλάσσια οριοθέτηση μεταξύ Ισραήλ-Λιβάνου" ["Analysis: The maritime delimitation between Israel and Lebanon"], Phileletheros, 1.8.2022 <https://www.philenews.com/eidiseis/politiki/article/1522980> b) Gabriel Haritos, "Η Energean σε ρόλο εγγυητή" ["Energean in the role of guarantor"], Phileletheros, 7.8.2022 <https://www.philenews.com/eidiseis/politiki/article/1527735> c) Gabriel Haritos, "Ο Λίβανος προτιμά την Total" [Lebanon prefers Total], 11.9.2022 <https://www.philenews.com/f-me-apopsi/paremvaseis-ston-f/article/1549877/o-libanos-protima-tin-total>

<sup>107</sup> HaAretz, "Full text: Final version of Israel-Lebanon Maritime Border Deal", 12.10.2022 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-10-12/ty-article/full-text-final-version-of-israel-lebanon-maritime-border-deal/00000183-cb43-d8cc-afc7-ffef25f80000> The final text of the Israel-Lebanon deal, as leaked to the Israeli press.

<sup>108</sup> Indicatively: Interactive visualization of the range of goods traded by Israel and Turkey, 2010-2020: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/tur/partner/ISR> [source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity]

<sup>109</sup> On Turkish-Israeli cooperation in the fight against international terrorism while their bilateral political relations remained frigid, cf. Michael J. Koplou, "Terrorism and Turkey's Deal with Israel", Foreign Affairs, 29 June 2016 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/turkey/terrorism-and-turkeys-deal-israel>

channels of communication with Tehran, are two areas which Greece and Cyprus could not replace Turkey in any case. Finally, it is worth stressing that, although Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations were fully restored in 2016-2018 (on the initiative of the Netanyahu administration), this development did not lead to a downgrading of the regional cooperation between Greece, Cyprus and Israel. In fact, it strengthened it.

Since taking office, the new Israeli government has taken pains to assure Greece and Cyprus that the achievements of the last decade will be maintained. That this is the reality is confirmed by the following data: With regard to the Turkish-Libyan memorandum on maritime zones, like the Netanyahu administration before it, the Bennett-Lapid government continues to interpret the legal matrix governing the maritime zones in the same way, even though Israel is not a signatory to the international treaty on the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). On the Cyprus issue, Foreign Minister Lapid condemned the Turkish actions within the Varosha buffer zone in July 2021.<sup>110</sup> Israel has also kept to its programme of joint military exercises with the Greek and Cypriot armed forces, increased the frequency of meetings between officers from the three countries, and inaugurated the International Flight Training Centre in Kalamata, a project that falls within the general framework of regional cooperation between Greece and Israel.<sup>111</sup> At the level of regional energy cooperation, the foundations were laid for a more realistic dialogue focused on the prospect of an "EastMed energy corridor" including a network of liquefaction plants and regional pipelines, while the construction of the EuroAsia Interconnector was also promoted.<sup>112</sup> At the EU level, with assistance from Greece and Cyprus, the EU-Israel Association Council resumed its activities after a long period in which poor relations—a consequence of the foreign policy of the previous Israeli administration—had kept it on ice.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, the improvement in bilateral Turkish-Israeli relations was accompanied by Israeli assurances that this development would not undermine the existing axis of cooperation. Also indicative of Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus were the successive visits of President Isaac Herzog to Athens and Nicosia, before his visit to Ankara on 9 March 2022.

*Israel-Greece-Cyprus relations are not tried and tested.*

*It would be useful to create a 'crisis management mechanism' involving Athens, Nicosia and Jerusalem to correspond to the new ties between Israel and Turkey.*

On the other hand, it cannot be denied fact that, compared with the historical depth of Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations, Israel's ties with Greece and Cyprus are less tried and tested in time. Consequently, and in order to render the sensitivities of the three parties comprehensible to all, along with the criteria that determine their choices, it would be useful to establish a 'crisis management mechanism' along the lines of the mechanism which, Herzog announced during his recent visit to Ankara, is now up and running between Israel and Turkey.

## Evaluation

After 12 years of Netanyahu governments, the new Israeli administration led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid was called upon to retain the many important achievements that had helped Israel to align itself smoothly with the changing realities of the Middle East, but also to

<sup>110</sup> Cf. a) Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "FM Lapid meets with Cypriot FM Nikos Christodoulides in Jerusalem", 27.7.2021 <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/fm-lapid-meets-with-cypriot-fm-christodoulides-27-july-2021> b) Haaretz, "Israel stands with Cyprus in dispute with Turkey over abandoned town, Foreign Minister says", 21.7.2021 <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/2021-07-21/ty-article/israel-stands-with-cyprus-in-dispute-with-turkey-over-abandoned-town-lapid-says/0000017f-e48d-d75c-a7ff-fc8dca190000>

<sup>111</sup> Euronews, "Ελλάδα-Ισραήλ: «Αμυντική εκπαιδευτική απογείωση» στην Καλαμάτα" ["Greece-Israel: 'Defence training take-off' in Kalamata"], 21.10.2022 <https://gr.euronews.com/2022/10/21/ellada-israil-amintiki-ekapidevtiki-apogeiosi-stin-kalamata> The International Flight Training Centre was inaugurated on 21.10.2022.

<sup>112</sup> Timetable for the construction of the EuroAsia Interconnector : <https://euroasia-interconnector.com/at-glance/project-timeline>

<sup>113</sup> European Council, Council of the European Union, "EU-Israel Association Council, 3 October 2022", 3.10.2022

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/10/03> A summary of the issues discussed and the EU position on the prospects for its relations with Israel.



try to smooth out the differences that had arisen in previous years with countries that are important for its security. The challenges that had to be met were many and varied: It was essential that Israel got the right messages across to the new Biden administration, both in terms of the handling of the negotiations in Vienna on limiting the Iranian nuclear programme and of the conflict with the Palestinians. It was equally essential to maintain the delicate balance with Russia, which was still a key stabilizing force in the volatile Syrian environment.

The Ukrainian crisis proved to be of vital importance, providing as it did the occasion for Israel to redefine its relations with both Russia and the United States. For the time being at least, Israel has put the new international and regional balances to good use, successfully removing the possibility of unwanted moves on Washington's part vis-à-vis both the handling of the Palestinian issue and the outcome of negotiations with Iran.

The new administration's communicational and institutional handling of the gradual improvement in Turkish-Israeli relations proved masterly. President Isaac Herzog's institutional role was made use of diplomatically, as was the influence of the media to explain to the Israeli public the decision to re-establish relations with Ankara—a move that had been anything but self-evident until recently and during the Netanyahu years. At the same time, importance was attached to confirming the quality of relations with Athens and Nicosia, irrespective of the renewal of relations with Turkey's decision-making centres.

The management of Israeli foreign policy under the Bennett-Lapid administration has been put to the test by adverse conditions, but it has proved itself capable of effectively keeping Israel attuned to a volatile international and regional environment. Though short-lived, its important legacy will continue to shape the course of Israel's international relations after the parliamentary elections of 1 November 2022, until the post-election political activity aimed at forming the new government that will succeed it is at an end.