
Israel and the Post-American Middle East

Why the Status Quo Is Sustainable

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as the feud between U.S. President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, first over settlements and then over Iran, a watershed? Netanyahu, it is claimed, turned U.S. support of [Israel](#) into a partisan issue. Liberals, including many American Jews, are said to be fed up with Israel's "occupation," which will mark its 50th anniversary next year. The weakening of Israel's [democratic ethos](#) is supposedly undercutting the "shared values" argument for the relationship. Some say Israel's dogged adherence to an "[unsustainable](#)" [status quo](#) in the West Bank has made it a liability in a region in the throes of change. Israel, it is claimed, is slipping into pariah status, imposed by the global movement for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS).

Biblical-style lamentations over Israel's final corruption have been a staple of the state's critics and die-hard anti-Zionists for 70 years. Never have they been so detached from reality. Of course, Israel has changed—decidedly for the better. By every measure, Israel is more globalized, prosperous, and democratic than at any time in its history. As nearby parts of the Middle East slip under waves of ruthless sectarian strife, [Israel's minorities](#) rest secure. As Europe staggers under the weight of unwanted Muslim migrants, Israel welcomes thousands of Jewish immigrants from Europe. As other Mediterranean countries struggle with debt and unemployment, Israel boasts a growing economy, supported by waves of foreign investment.

Politically, Netanyahu's tenure has been Israel's least tumultuous. Netanyahu has served longer than any other Israeli prime minister except David Ben-Gurion, yet he has led Israel in only one ground war: the limited Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in 2014. "I'd feel better if our partner was not the trigger-happy Netanyahu," [wrote](#) the *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd four years ago. But Netanyahu hasn't pulled triggers, even against Iran. The Israeli electorate keeps returning him to office precisely because he is risk averse: no needless wars, but no ambitious peace plans either. Although this may produce "[overwhelming frustration](#)" in Obama's White

House, in Vice President Joe Biden's scolding phrase, it suits the majority of Israeli Jews just fine.

Netanyahu's endurance fuels the frustration of Israel's [diminished left](#), too: thwarted at the ballot box, they comfort themselves with a false notion that [Israel's democracy is endangered](#). The right made similar claims 20 years ago, culminating in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Anti-democratic forces exist in all democracies, but in Israel, they are either outside the system or confined in smaller parties, Jewish and Arab alike. There is no mechanism by which an outlier could capture one of the main political parties in a populist upsurge, as now seems likely in the United States. Under comparable pressures of terrorism and war, even old democracies have wavered, but Israel's record of fair, free elections testifies to the depth of its homegrown democratic ethos, reinforced by a vigorous press and a vigilant judiciary.

Israel is also [more secure](#) than ever. In 1948, only 700,000 Jews faced the daunting challenge of winning independence against the arrayed armies of the Arab world. Ben-Gurion's top commanders warned him that Israel had only a 50-50 chance of victory. Today, there are over six million Israeli Jews, and Israel is among the world's most formidable military powers. It has a [qualitative edge](#) over any imaginable combination of enemies, and the ongoing digitalization of warfare has played precisely to Israel's strengths. The Arab states have dropped out of the competition, leaving the field to die-hard Islamists on Israel's borders. They champion "resistance," but their primitive rocketry and tunnel digging are ineffective. The only credible threat to a viable Israel would be a nuclear Iran. No one doubts that if Iran ever breaks out, Israel could deploy its own nuclear deterrent, independent of any constraining alliance.

And what of the Palestinians? There is no near solution to this enduring conflict, but Israel has been adept at containing its effects. There is occupied territory, but there is also unoccupied territory. Israel maintains an over-the-horizon security footprint in most of the West Bank; Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation fills in most of the gaps. The Palestinian Authority, in the words of one wag, has become a "mini-Jordan," buttressed by a combination of foreign aid, economic growth, and the usual corruption. By the standards of today's Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [remains stable](#). It is prosecuted mostly at a distance, through maneuvering in

international bodies and campaigns for and against BDS. These are high-decibel, low-impact confrontations. Yossi Vardi, Israel's most famous high-tech entrepreneur, [summarizes](#) the mainstream Israeli view: "I'm not at all concerned about the economic effect of BDS. We have been subject to boycotts before." And they were much worse.

Every political party in Israel has its own preferred solution to the conflict, but no solution offers an unequivocal advantage over the status quo. "The occupation as it is now can last forever, and it is better than any alternative"—this opinion, [issued](#) in April by Benny Ziffer, the literary editor of the liberal, left-wing *Haaretz*, summarizes the present Israeli consensus. It is debatable whether the two-state option has [expired](#). But the reality on the ground doesn't resemble one state either. Half a century after the 1967 war, only five percent of Israelis live in West Bank settlements, and half of them live in the five blocs that would be retained by Israel in any two-state scenario.

In the meantime, Egypt, Jordan, [Saudi Arabia](#), and the United Arab Emirates are all shaking hands with Israel, sometimes before the cameras. Israel and Russia are assiduously courting each other; still farther afield, Israel's relations with China and India are booming. The genuine pariah of the Middle East is the Syrian regime, which never deigned to make peace with Israel. This last so-called steadfast Arab state is consumed from within by a great bloodbath; its nuclear project and massive stocks of chemical weapons are a distant memory.

Israel faces all manner of potential threats and challenges, but never has it been more thoroughly prepared to meet them. The notion popular among some Israeli pundits that their compatriots live in a perpetual state of paralyzing fear misleads both Israel's allies and its adversaries. Israel's leaders are cautious but confident, not easily panicked, and practiced in the very long game that everyone plays in the Middle East. Nothing leaves them so unmoved as the vacuous mantra that the status quo is unsustainable. Israel's survival has always depended on its willingness to sustain the status quo that it has created, driving its adversaries to resignation—and compromise. This is more an art than a science, but such resolve has served Israel well over time.

THE SUPERPOWER RETREATS

Still, there is a looming cloud on Israel's horizon. It isn't Iran's delayed nukes, academe's threats of boycott, or Palestinian maneuvers at the UN. It is a huge power vacuum. The United States, after a wildly erratic spree of misadventures, is [backing out](#) of the region. It is cutting its exposure to a Middle East that has consistently defied American expectations and denied successive American presidents the "mission accomplished" moments they crave. The disengagement began before Obama entered the White House, but he has accelerated it, coming to see the Middle East as a region to be avoided because it "could not be fixed—not on his watch, and not for a generation to come." (This was the bottom-line impression of the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, to whom Obama granted [his legacy interview](#) on foreign policy.)

If history is precedent, this is more than a pivot. Over the last century, the Turks, the British, the French, and the Russians each had their moment in the Middle East, but prolonging it proved costly as their power ebbed. They gave up the pursuit of dominance and settled for influence. A decade ago, in the pages of this magazine, Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, [predicted](#) that the United States had reached just this point: "The American era in the Middle East," he announced, ". . . has ended." He went on: "The United States will continue to enjoy more influence in the region than any other outside power, but its influence will be reduced from what it once was." That was a debatable proposition in 2006; now in 2016, Obama has made it indisputable.

There are several ways to make a retreat seem other than it is. The Obama administration's tack has been to create the illusion of a stable equilibrium, by cutting the United States' commitments to its allies and mollifying its adversaries. And so, suddenly, none of the United States' traditional friends is good enough to justify its full confidence. The great power must conceal its own weariness, so it pretends to be frustrated by the inconstancy of "free riders." The resulting complaints about Israel (as well as Egypt and Saudi Arabia) serve just such a narrative.

Israel's leaders aren't shy about warning against the consequences of this posture, but they are careful not to think out loud about Israeli options in [a post-American Middle East](#). Israel wants a new memorandum of understanding with the United States, the bigger the better, as compensation for the Iran nuclear deal. It is in Israel's interest to emphasize the importance

of the U.S.-Israeli relationship as the bedrock of regional stability going forward.

But how far forward is another question. Even as Israel seeks to deepen the United States' commitment in the short term, it knows that the unshakable bond won't last in perpetuity. This is a lesson of history. The leaders of the Zionist movement always sought to ally their project with the dominant power of the day, but they had lived through too much European history to think that great power is ever abiding. In the twentieth century, they witnessed the collapse of old empires and the rise of new ones, each staking its claim to the Middle East in turn, each making promises and then rescinding them. When the United States' turn came, the emerging superpower didn't rush to embrace the Jews. They were alone during the 1930s, when the gates of the United States were closed to them. They were alone during the Holocaust, when the United States awoke too late. They were alone in 1948, when the United States placed Israel under an arms embargo, and in 1967, when a U.S. president explicitly told the Israelis that if they went to war, they would be alone.

After 1967, Israel nestled in the Pax Americana. The subsequent decades of the "special relationship" have so deepened Israel's dependence on the United States in the military realm that many Israelis can no longer remember how Israel managed to survive without all that U.S. hardware. Israel's own armies of supporters in the United States, especially in the Jewish community, reinforce this mindset as they assure themselves that were it not for their lobbying efforts in Washington, Israel would be in mortal peril.

But the Obama administration has given Israelis a preview of just how the unshakable bond is likely to be shaken. This prospect might seem alarming to Israel's supporters, but the inevitable turn of the wheel was precisely the reason Zionist Jews sought sovereign independence in the first place. An independent Israel is a guarantee against the day when the Jews will again find themselves alone, and it is an operating premise of Israeli strategic thought that such a day will come.

ISRAEL ALONE

This conviction, far from paralyzing Israel, propels it to [expand its options](#), diversify its relationships, and build its independent capabilities. The Middle East of the next 50 years will be different from that of the last 100. There will

be no hegemony-seeking outside powers. The costs of pursuing full-spectrum dominance are too high; the rewards are too few. Outside powers will pursue specific goals, related to oil or terrorism. But large swaths of the Middle East will be left to their fate, to dissolve and re-form in unpredictable ways. Israel may be asked by weaker neighbors to extend its security net to include them, as it has done for decades for Jordan. Arab concern about Iran is already doing more to normalize Israel in the region than the ever-elusive and ever-inconclusive peace process. Israel, once the fulcrum of regional conflict, will loom like a pillar of regional stability—not only for its own people but also for its neighbors, threatened by a rising tide of political fragmentation, economic contraction, radical Islam, and sectarian hatred.

So Israel is planning to outlast the United States in the Middle East. Israelis roll their eyes when the United States insinuates that it best understands Israel's genuine long-term interests, which Israel is supposedly too traumatized or confused to discern. Although Israel has made plenty of tactical mistakes, it is hard to argue that its strategy has been anything but a success. And given the wobbly record of the United States in achieving or even defining its interests in the Middle East, it is hard to say the same about U.S. strategy. The Obama administration has placed its bet on the Iran deal, but even the deal's most ardent advocates no longer claim to see the "arc of history" in the Middle East. In the face of the collapse of the Arab Spring, the Syrian dead, the millions of refugees, and the rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS, who can say in which direction the arc points? Or where the Iran deal will lead?

One other common American mantra deserves to be shelved. "Precisely because of our friendship," said Obama five years ago, "it is important that we tell the truth: the status quo is unsustainable, and Israel too must act boldly to advance a lasting peace." It is time for the United States to abandon this mantra, or at least modify it. Only if Israel's adversaries conclude that Israel can sustain the status quo indefinitely—Israel's military supremacy, its economic advantage, and, yes, its occupation—is there any hope that they will reconcile themselves to Israel's existence as a Jewish state. Statements like Obama's don't sway Israel's government, which knows better, but they do fuel Arab and Iranian rejection of Israel among those who believe that the United States no longer has Israel's back. For Israel's enemies, drawing the conclusion that Israel is thus weak would be a tragic mistake: Israel is well

positioned to sustain the status quo all by itself. Its long-term strategy is predicated on it.

A new U.S. administration will offer an opportunity to revisit U.S. policy, or at least U.S. rhetoric. One of the candidates, Hillary Clinton, made [a statement](#) as secretary of state in Jerusalem in 2010 that came closer to reality and practicality. “The status quo is unsustainable,” she said, echoing the usual line. But she added this: “Now, that doesn’t mean that it can’t be sustained for a year or a decade, or two or three, but fundamentally, the status quo is unsustainable.” Translation: the status quo may not be optimal, but it is sustainable, for as long as it takes.

As the United States steps back from the Middle East, this is the message Washington should send if it wants to assist Israel and other U.S. allies in filling the vacuum it will leave behind.