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Israel: New Prime Minister and U.S. Relations in Brief

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SUMMARY

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Israel: New Prime Minister and U.S. Relations in Brief

The following matters are of particular significance to U.S.-Israel relations.

New prime minister and an end to Netanyahu's rule. A group of disparate parties from across the political spectrum agreed in June 2021 to form a power-sharing government to replace long-serving Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who is being tried in an Israeli court on corruption charges. On June 13, the Knesset (Israel's unicameral parliament) approved the new government, headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of the Yamina party. Despite holding more right-of-center and nationalistic positions than Netanyahu on Palestinian issues and settlements, Bennett may be constrained by left-of-center and Arab-led parties in the coalition from taking action in line with those positions. The government is generally expected to focus on pragmatic management of Israel's security and economy rather than controversial political initiatives, but Netanyahu and others in opposition may challenge its cohesion. If the government survives, Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party—the current foreign minister—will rotate into the prime minister's office in August 2023, under the terms of the power-sharing agreement. The Arab-led, Islamist United Arab List is seeking to use its status as part of the coalition to have the government address socioeconomic inequalities among the Arab citizens who make up around 20% of Israel's population. It is unclear to what extent the new government might change Israel's approach to relations with the United States, including on important regional matters involving the Palestinians and Iran.

Israeli-Palestinian disputes, including the May 2021 Israel-Gaza conflict and its aftermath. In hopes of preserving the viability of a negotiated two-state solution among Israelis and Palestinians, Biden Administration officials have sought to help manage tensions, bolster Israel's defensive capabilities, and strengthen U.S.-Palestinian ties that frayed during the Trump Administration. In May 2021, an 11-day conflict took place between Israel and Hamas (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization), which maintains de facto control within Gaza. It was the fourth major conflict of its kind, with previous ones occurring in 2008-2009, 2012, and 2014. Intercommunal protests and violence also took place among Arabs and Jews within Israel and Jerusalem. Hamas apparently sought to capitalize on Arab-Jewish tensions over Jerusalem to increase its domestic popularity vis-à-vis rival faction Fatah. In April, Fatah's leader Mahmoud Abbas—the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) president—had postponed plans for 2021 PA elections that many Palestinians had eagerly anticipated.

In the conflict's aftermath, the Biden Administration appears focused on restoring regional calm and improving humanitarian conditions. It is unclear that the conflict decisively changed dynamics between the key parties affected—Israel, Hamas, and the PA. President Biden has pledged to replenish Israel's Iron Dome anti-rocket system, and legislative proposals may be forthcoming on supplemental U.S. military aid for Israel. With Gaza still under Hamas control, the obstacles to post-conflict recovery remain largely the same as in the past. Beyond providing short-term humanitarian assistance, the United States and other international actors face significant challenges in seeking to help with longer-term reconstruction without bolstering Hamas.

Palestinians and Arab state normalization. To date, the Biden Administration has not reversed steps taken by the Trump Administration in apparent connection with 2020 normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. In connection with its deal with the UAE, Israel agreed in August 2020 to suspend plans to annex part of the West Bank, though announcements related to settlement activity accelerated after the agreement. Israeli normalization with Arab states could raise questions about the future of cooperation and rivalry among key actors in the Middle East. Arab-Israeli common cause could intensify, dwindle, or fluctuate in countering Iran and perhaps even Turkey and Qatar, two countries that provide some support for Sunni Islamist movements.

Iran and other regional issues. Israeli officials seek to counter Iranian regional influence and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Israel supported President Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the 2015 international agreement that constrained Iran's nuclear activities. Facing intensified U.S. sanctions, Iran has reduced its compliance with the 2015 agreement. Israeli officials have made statements opposing the Biden Administration's possible reentry into the agreement. In light of recent incidents targeting Iran's nuclear program that may have been Israeli covert actions, observers have speculated about future Israeli actions to influence or disrupt nuclear diplomacy. Israel also has reportedly conducted a number of military operations in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon against Iran and its allies due to concerns about Iran's efforts to establish a permanent presence in these areas and improve the accuracy of Lebanese Hezbollah's missile arsenal.

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Introduction: Major Issues for U.S.-Israel Relations

Israel (see **Appendix A** for a map and basic facts) has forged close bilateral cooperation with the United States in many areas; issues with significant implications for U.S.-Israel relations include the following.

- The June 2021 formation of a new Israeli power-sharing government, headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, after 12 years with Binyamin Netanyahu serving as prime minister.
- Israel's security cooperation with the United States.
- Issues relevant to Israeli-Palestinian disputes, including the aftermath of May 2021 Israel-Gaza Strip violence, human rights considerations, and Israel's normalization of relations with various Arab states.
- Concerns about Iran's nuclear program and regional influence, including with Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

For background information and analysis on these and other topics, including aid, arms sales, and missile defense cooperation, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti; and CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

New Prime Minister and End of Netanyahu's Rule

A new power-sharing government headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (see the text box below for a brief biography) took office on June 13, 2021, putting an end to a 12-year-run as prime minister by Binyamin Netanyahu.[1] The government was approved by a slim margin (60-59, with one abstention) in Israel's Knesset (its unicameral parliament).

Since Netanyahu's criminal indictment on corruption charges in February 2019, Israel has held four separate elections—the most recent in March 2021—and experienced considerable political turmoil. Netanyahu had stayed in power during that time for various reasons, including lack of Israeli consensus on replacing him during the crisis over the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic, and his prominence on national security issues. With his efforts to block the new government unsuccessful, Netanyahu and his Likud party will lead the Knesset's opposition, as was the case from 2006 to 2009. Questions surround Netanyahu's prospects for continuing as Likud's leader and his overall future.

The Power-Sharing Government and Arab Participation

Bennett—a right-of-center figure who leads the Yamina party—and the centrist Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid reached agreement across Israel's political spectrum to oust Netanyahu. The new government draws its support from a disparate coalition of parties on the right (Yamina, New Hope, Yisrael Beitenu), center (Yesh Atid and Kahol Lavan), and left (Labor, Meretz) of the political spectrum, as well as from the Arab-led, Islamist United Arab List (UAL or Ra'am) (see **Table 1** and **Appendix B**).

[1] Netanyahu also served an earlier 1996-1999 term as prime minister.

Table 1. Israeli Power-Sharing Government: Key Positions

Position	Name	Party
Prime Minister	Naftali Bennett	Yamina
Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister	Yair Lapid	Yesh Atid
Defense Minister	Benny Gantz	Kahol Lavan
Finance Minister	Avigdor Lieberman	Yisrael Beitenu
Justice Minister	Gideon Sa'ar	New Hope
Interior Minister	Ayelet Shaked	Yamina
Transportation Minister	Merav Michaeli	Labor
Public Security Minister	Omer Bar Lev	Labor
Health Minister	Nitzan Horowitz	Meretz

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett: Biography

Bennett, born in 1972, is a leading figure of the Israeli national religious, pro-settler right. He hails from a modern Orthodox Jewish background. Having parents who emigrated from the United States, Bennett lived in America at various points as a youth and adult. He served in various Israeli special forces units (and remains a reservist) before starting what became a very successful career as a software entrepreneur.

Entering politics in 2006, Bennett served as chief of staff for Binyamin Netanyahu until 2008, while Netanyahu was serving as opposition leader in the Knesset. Reportedly, the Netanyahu family harbors some personal animosity toward Bennett dating from his time on Netanyahu's staff.[2] Later, Bennett served as director-general of the Yesha Council (the umbrella organization for Israeli West Bank settlers) from 2010 to 2012.

He then became the party leader for HaBayit HaYehudi (The Jewish Home) and led the party into the Knesset in 2013. In 2018 he left The Jewish Home, seeking various right-of-center electoral alliances before finally becoming head of Yamina in 2020. Bennett has participated in several coalition governments led by Netanyahu, serving as economy minister (2013-2015), education minister (2015-2019), and defense minister (2019-2020). In May 2020, he led Yamina into the opposition when Netanyahu and Likud formed a power-sharing government with Benny Gantz and Kahol Lavan.

Bennett openly opposes the creation of a Palestinian state, though he approves of greater Palestinian autonomy in West Bank urban areas. He supports continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the annexation of Jewish-settled areas. However, he has agreed not to pursue annexation as prime minister in the current power-sharing government.

On domestic issues, Bennett generally supports free-market policies, a modest government safety net, and a focus on equality of opportunity and education for economically challenged Israelis. He and his close political colleague Ayelet Shaked, who served as justice minister from 2015 to 2019, support limiting the power of the judiciary to constrain what appears to be increasingly nationalistic voter sentiment among Jewish Israelis.

The participation of UAL in the coalition is the first instance of an independent Arab party joining an Israeli government.[3] Generally, Arab parties have not joined ruling coalitions, partly because

[2] Laurie Kellman, "Bennett, Netanyahu's former protege, poised to succeed him," *Associated Press*, June 3, 2021.

[3] According to one Israeli media source, "Only twice have Arab Israeli parties backed an Israeli government. In the 1950s, a small faction composed of one Arab parliamentarian entered the coalition. The faction was far from independent, essentially operating as an Arab franchise of Israel's ruling socialist party, Mapai. In the 1990s, when the government of left-wing Labor party leader Yitzhak Rabin was in danger of collapsing, the Arab parties stepped in to prevent a vote of no confidence." Aaron Boxerman, "History made as Arab Israeli Ra'am party joins Bennett-Lapid coalition," *Times of Israel*, June 3, 2021.

of historical and cultural Arab-Jewish tensions in Israel, as well as Arab desires to avoid direct involvement in Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza.

During this year's election and government formation cycle, UAL leader Mansour Abbas expressed his willingness to support a government of any nature if doing so could elicit specific government promises to benefit Arab Israelis. With the outbreak of Arab-Jewish unrest and violence in some Israeli cities during the May 2021 Israel-Gaza conflict, Abbas temporarily withdrew from coalition negotiations, but he publicly called for an end to violence, and returned to talks with Jewish parties after tensions largely subsided. The power-sharing agreement reportedly includes promises to provide more than $16 billion in targeted funding to assist with economic development, infrastructure, and other needs in Arab-populated areas of Israel, and contemplates relaxing some government restrictions on the expansion of Arab communities.[4]

Looking Ahead and Issues for U.S. Policy

Various questions beset the new government. According to its power-sharing agreement, Bennett is scheduled to serve as prime minister until August 27, 2023, at which point Lapid would become prime minister. Given the fractious nature of the coalition, a *New York Times* article anticipated that the new government may not address "contentious issues such as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or judicial reform. Instead it will likely focus on more straight-ahead policies, such as creating a new state budget, restoring the post-pandemic economy and improving infrastructure."[5] With ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) parties absent from the coalition, some observers speculate about the prospects for a new government to reduce religious influence over Israeli society on matters such as marriage, gay rights, and public services on the Sabbath.[6]

Significant disagreements within or defections from the government could lead to its collapse and new elections—perhaps leaving open the possibility of a return by Netanyahu to power. Netanyahu and other right-of-center figures have criticized members from Yamina and New Hope for abandoning their natural ideological partners, in an apparent effort to weaken the coalition's cohesion. However, if Bennett and Lapid can convince others to join the coalition, the government's lasting power could increase.

Netanyahu's departure from office and the new government's formation have the potential to affect U.S.-Israel relations. Three former U.S. officials wrote that the Biden Administration might expect "a few months of calm on the Palestinian issue and the Iran nuclear deal—thanks as much to gridlock in the Knesset as to Jerusalem's desire to smooth relations with Washington."[7] However, Prime Minister Bennett's positions on Palestinian issues are more nationalistic than Netanyahu's, even if Bennett's left-leaning and Arab coalition partners are likely to constrain his actions. Some specific policy questions of importance include the following:

- **U.S. relations.** What changes in approach, if any, will the new government make to relations with the Biden Administration and Members of Congress from both parties?

[4] Boxerman.

[5] Patrick Kingsley, "Israel on Edge as Politicians Wrangle Over Coalition to Oust Netanyahu," *New York Times*, June 3, 2021.

[6] Isabel Kershner, "Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Jews Face a Loss of Power," *New York Times*, June 7, 2021.

[7] Daniel C. Kurtzer, Aaron David Miller, and Steven N. Simon, "Netanyahu's On the Way Out. Here's What Biden Can Expect Next," *Politico*, June 2, 2021.

- **Iran.** What public line will the government take on a possible U.S. return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program, and what means will it use to influence international diplomacy on the issue?
- **Palestinian issues.** How will the government approach sensitive Arab-Jewish intercommunal issues in Israel and Jerusalem, settlement expansion in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and efforts to maintain calm with Gaza and allow post-conflict recovery?
- **Regional challenges.** How will Iran and its allies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza seek to test the government's resolve, and how will the government respond?

U.S. Aid and Security Cooperation with Israel[8]

Israel maintains robust military and homeland security capabilities, partly owing to its close cooperation with the United States on national security matters. U.S. law requires the executive branch to take certain actions to preserve Israel's "qualitative military edge," or QME, and expedites aid and arms sales to Israel in various ways. Additionally, a 10-year bilateral military aid memorandum of understanding (MOU)—signed in 2016—commits the United States to provide Israel $3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing and to spend $500 million annually on joint missile defense programs from FY2019 to FY2028, subject to congressional appropriations. Israel was the first foreign country to purchase and operate the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Congress also has authorized and encouraged bilateral cooperation in a number of specific security-related areas, including anti-tunnel defense and countering drone aircraft.

Israeli-Palestinian Disputes

Biden Administration officials have said that they seek to preserve the viability of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In doing so, they seek to help manage tensions—such as during the May 2021 Israel-Gaza conflict mentioned below, bolster Israel's defensive capabilities, and strengthen U.S.-Palestinian ties that frayed during the Trump Administration. They also have played down near-term prospects for direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and have respected agreements reached during the Trump Administration that normalized or improved relations between Israel and four Arab states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. As part of the FY2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act enacted in December 2020, the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act of 2020 (Title VIII of P.L. 116-260) authorized the future establishment of a fund to support Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and reconciliation programs, and an initiative to promote Israeli-Palestinian economic cooperation.

May 2021 Israel-Gaza Conflict

In May 2021, an 11-day conflict (see text box below) took place between Israel and Hamas (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization), which maintains de facto control within Gaza.[9] Amid unrest in the West Bank during the conflict (May 10-21), one source estimates that 27

[8] For more information, see CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[9] Another U.S.-designated terrorist organization, Palestine Islamic Jihad, also took part from Gaza.

Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces.[10] Intercommunal protests and violence also took place within Israel and Jerusalem—involving some Arab citizens of Israel, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, Jewish nationalists, and Israeli authorities. In the aftermath, the Biden Administration appears focused on restoring regional calm and improving humanitarian conditions.

Major Israel-Hamas Conflicts Since 2008

December 2008-January 2009: Israeli code name "Operation Cast Lead"

- Three-week duration, first meaningful display of Palestinians' Iranian-origin rockets, Israeli air strikes and ground offensive
- Political context: Impending leadership transitions in Israel and United States, struggling Israeli-Palestinian peace talks (Annapolis process)
- Fatalities: More than 1,100 (possibly more than 1,400) Palestinians, 13 Israelis (3 civilians)

November 2012: "Operation Pillar of Defense (or Cloud)"

- Eight-day duration, Palestinian projectiles of greater range and variety, Israeli air strikes, prominent role for Israel's Iron Dome anti-rocket system (became operational in 2011)
- Political context: Widespread Arab political change, including rise of Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt; three months before Israeli elections
- Fatalities: More than 100 Palestinians, 6 Israelis (4 civilians)

July-August 2014: "Operation Protective Edge/Mighty Cliff"

- About 50-day duration, Palestinian projectiles of greater range and variety, Israeli air strikes and ground offensive, extensive Palestinian use of and Israeli countermeasures against tunnels within Gaza, prominent role for Iron Dome
- Political context: Shortly after an unsuccessful round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the prominent killings of Israeli and Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Jerusalem
- Fatalities: More than 2,100 Palestinians, 71 Israelis (5 civilians), and 1 foreign worker

May 2021: "Operation Guardian of the Walls"

- 11-day duration, unprecedented Palestinian rocket barrages into central Israel, Israeli air and artillery strikes, prominent role for Iron Dome, major Arab-Jewish unrest within Israel for much of the conflict
- Political context: Tensions over Jerusalem during Ramadan, new U.S. Administration, significant domestic political uncertainty for both Israelis and Palestinians (including recent postponement of PA elections).
- Fatalities: More than 240 Palestinians, 12 in Israel (including 2 Thai nationals)

During the conflict, Palestinian militants fired rockets at Israeli populated areas, leading to major disruptions to daily life and other challenges for millions of Israelis. Israeli strikes targeting militants largely focused on targets in the densely populated urban areas of Gaza. While the Israel Defense Forces claimed, as in previous conflicts, that they took measures to warn civilians of impending strikes,[11] some strikes killed or injured civilians and damaged residential areas.[12] Various factors contribute to civilians' humanitarian plight in Gaza, including deficient infrastructure and health care facilities, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic, and challenges

[10] U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – Occupied Palestinian Territory, "West Bank: Escalation of Violence 13 April - 21 May 2021," June 6, 2021.

[11] Felicia Schwartz and Jared Malsin, "Israel Says Strikes to Go On As Gaza Death Toll Mounts," *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2021.

[12] Aaron Boxerman, "'Screams under the rubble': 42 said killed in Israeli airstrike in Gaza City," *Times of Israel*, May 16, 2021.

to delivering needed utilities and resources.[13] In connection with the fighting, this plight worsened from damage sustained to health care facilities, water and sewage infrastructure, and schools.[14]

Gaza and Its Challenges

The Gaza Strip—controlled by Hamas, but significantly affected by general Israeli and Egyptian access and import/export restrictions—faces difficult and complicated political, economic, and humanitarian conditions.[15] Palestinian militants in Gaza periodically clash with Israel's military as it patrols Gaza's frontiers with Israel, with militant actions and Israeli responses sometimes endangering civilian areas in southern Israel and Gaza, respectively. These incidents periodically escalate toward larger conflict (see text box above). Hamas and Israel reportedly work through Egypt and Qatar to help manage the flow of necessary resources into Gaza and prevent or manage conflict escalation.

By engaging in conflict with Israel, Hamas apparently sought to capitalize on Arab-Jewish tensions over Jerusalem to increase its domestic popularity vis-à-vis rival faction Fatah.[16] In April, Fatah's leader Mahmoud Abbas—the West Bank-based PA president—had postponed plans for 2021 PA elections that many Palestinians had eagerly anticipated.[17] Abbas cited Israel's unwillingness to allow East Jerusalem Palestinians to vote in PA elections (which were scheduled for May) as grounds for their postponement.[18]

Mounting tension in Jerusalem was fueled by provocations—reportedly aided by social media—tied to Israeli measures restricting Palestinian movement and worship in and around the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif ("Mount/Haram") holy sites in the Old City,[19] isolated attacks by Palestinians, and demonstrations by Jewish nationalist groups.[20] Unrest intensified in response to controversy over the possible eviction of several Palestinian families from their longtime residences in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, stemming from an Israeli law that allows for Jewish recovery of property abandoned in connection with the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.[21] Israel's Supreme Court temporarily delayed a hearing on the case amid the unrest, but the case may be decided in mid-2021.[22] Palestinian leaders and some activists and international actors claim that the case is part of a systematic Israeli disregard for Palestinian rights in East Jerusalem since the area's capture and effective annexation as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.[23] Critics

[13] Raja Abdulrahim, "Thousands of Civilians Flee Airstrikes in Gaza," *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2021.

[14] Iyad Abuheweila et al., "Gaza Reels From Strikes That Underscore Scope Of Deep-Rooted Misery," *New York Times*, May 19, 2021.

[15] CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

[16] Amos Harel, "Israel Wants to Win in Gaza, but Erasing Hamas' Accomplishments Won't Come Easy," *Haaretz*, May 13, 2021.

[17] Patrick Kingsley, "Palestinian Vote Postponed, Prolonging Tensions," *New York Times*, April 30, 2021.

[18] Daoud Kuttab, "Palestinian president decides —on his own— to postpone elections," *Al-Monitor*, April 30, 2021.

[19] For background on Jerusalem and its holy sites, see CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

[20] "From TikTok to Temple Mount Clashes: 28 Days of Violence in Jerusalem," haaretz.com, May 10, 2021.

[21] Nir Hasson, "Jerusalem Clashes: How Palestinians Rallied Behind Sheikh Jarrah," haaretz.com, May 8, 2021. Some Israeli human rights organizations estimate that more than 1,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem across a number of cases are at risk of being evicted from their current residences. Joseph Krauss, "Palestinians fear loss of family homes as evictions loom," *Associated Press*, May 10, 2021.

[22] Netael Bandel, "Israel Won't Intervene in Sheikh Jarrah Case, Making Eviction of Palestinian Families More Likely," haaretz.com, June 7, 2021.

[23] Patrick Kingsley, "Israel's Supreme Court Delays Expulsion of Palestinian Families in East Jerusalem," *New York Times*, May 10, 2021.

of Israeli actions connect this situation with concerns about Jewish settlement activity and other allegations that Israel violates international law and Palestinian human rights.[24]

The Conflict's Aftermath

Assessment

It is unclear that the conflict decisively changed the positions of the key parties affected—Israel, Hamas, and the PA—vis-à-vis one another. Factors that may influence developments going forward include

- whether Hamas assesses that renewed conflict could boost its domestic popularity, and further fuel Arab-Jewish unrest in Israel and the West Bank;
- the extent to which Israeli measures (including its Iron Dome anti-rocket system and operations targeting Palestinian militants) prevent, deter, or provoke additional violence;[25]
- disruptions or perceived disruptions to the "status quo" arrangement governing worship at Jerusalem's holy sites, especially the Mount/Haram;[26]
- open questions regarding leadership stability within both Israel and the PA; and
- diplomacy and post-conflict aid involving international actors, including the United States, Egypt, Qatar, and Arab states who have recently improved or sought to improve their relations with Israel.

Observers have shared varying views about how the relatively greater volume and intensity of Palestinian militants' rocket fire in this conflict might affect future military calculations. Two analysts asserted that the saturation tactic employed by Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad achieved only limited success, "since improvements to Iron Dome largely negated the heavier barrages."[27] Another analyst wrote that the barrages stretched Israel's air defenses in a way that suggested "they may one day not be enough to hinder volumes of rockets," whether against threats from Gaza or from other Iran-backed actors like Hezbollah in Lebanon.[28]

[24] Al-Haq, "Action Alert: International Community Must Take Immediate and Concrete Measures to Halt Israel's Aggression against Palestinian Jerusalemites," May 10, 2021. For additional information, see CRS Report R46433, *Israel's Possible Annexation of West Bank Areas: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Jim Zanotti.

[25] Sebastien Roblin, "How Hamas' Arsenal Shaped the Gaza War of May 2021," forbes.com, May 25, 2021. For more on Iron Dome, see CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[26] "From TikTok to Temple Mount Clashes: 28 Days of Violence in Jerusalem," haaretz.com, May 10, 2021. Under the "status quo" arrangement (largely based on past practices dating from the 16th century that Israel pledges to uphold), Muslims can access the Mount/Haram and worship there, while Jews and other non-Muslims are permitted limited access but not permitted to worship. Jewish worship is permitted at the Western Wall at the base of the Mount/Haram.

[27] Grant Rumley and Neri Zilber, "A Military Assessment of the Israel-Hamas Conflict," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 3489, May 25, 2021: "4,300 rockets were launched (of which over 600 fell in Gaza). Over eleven days of conflict, this averages out to around 390 launches daily, compared to approximately 650 total rockets fired over twenty-two days in 2008-2009 (29 per day), 1,500 over eight days in 2012 (187 per day), and more than 4,500 spread out over fifty days in 2014 (90 per day)."

[28] Seth Frantzman, "Israel's Iron Dome Won't Last Forever," foreignpolicy.com, June 3, 2021.

Military Aid for Israel

As the cease-fire was about to come into effect, President Biden reiterated U.S. support for Israel's right to defend itself and pledged to replenish Israel's Iron Dome anti-rocket system.[29] During the conflict, some Members of Congress objected to Israeli airstrikes that resulted in civilian casualties and displacement, and sought to restrict a recent proposed $735 million commercial sale of U.S. precision-guided munitions to Israel.[30] On June 2, 56 Representatives sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin urgently requesting a report on Israel's military needs in the conflict's wake.[31]

Some statements suggest that legislative proposals may be forthcoming on supplemental U.S. military aid to Israel. In early June, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz traveled to Washington, DC, for meetings with top Biden Administration officials, and Senator Lindsey Graham spoke of a potential Israeli request for up to $1 billion in aid.[32] In August 2014, near the end of the last major Israel-Gaza conflict, Congress enacted an emergency supplemental appropriations resolution (P.L. 113-145) to provide $225 million in Department of Defense funding for Iron Dome.

Post-Conflict Recovery in Gaza

In anticipation of the cease-fire, President Biden said

> The United States is committed to working with the United Nations, and we remain committed to working with the United Nations and other international stakeholders to provide rapid humanitarian assistance and to marshal international support for the people of Gaza and the Gaza reconstruction efforts.
>
> We will do this in full partnership with the Palestinian Authority—not Hamas, the Authority—in a manner that does not permit Hamas to simply restock its military arsenal.
>
> I believe the Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely and securely and to enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity, and democracy.

During a visit to the region, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced some economic and humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians in partial connection with post-conflict recovery.[33] Blinken also spoke out against steps taken by either side that he said could risk sparking violence and undermining the vision of two states—including settlement activity, demolitions, evictions, incitement to violence, and payment to terrorists.[34]

With Gaza still under Hamas control, the obstacles to post-conflict recovery remain largely the same as after the 2008-2009, 2012, and 2014 conflicts.[35] Beyond providing short-term humanitarian assistance, the United States and other international actors face significant

[29] White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the Middle East," May 20, 2021.

[30] Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "Ocasio-Cortez, Pocan & Tlaib Lead Joint Resolution to Block Weapon Sales to Netanyahu," May 19, 2021. Senator Bernie Sanders, "NEWS: Sanders Moves to Block Weapons Sale to Israel," May 20, 2021.

[31] See text of letter at https://gottheimer.house.gov/uploadedfiles/letter_to_sec_def_re_iron_dome_replenishment.pdf.

[32] Jacob Magid, "Gantz urges softer tone with US on Iran, seems to knock Netanyahu's 'provoking,'" *Times of Israel*, June 4, 2021.

[33] For information on U.S. aid announced for Palestinians in 2021, see CRS In Focus IF10644, *The Palestinians: Overview, 2021 Aid, and U.S. Policy Issues*, by Jim Zanotti.

[34] State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," Jerusalem, May 25, 2021.

[35] David Makovsky, "Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 25, 2021.

challenges in seeking to help with longer-term reconstruction. Because of the PA's inability to control security in Gaza, it has been unwilling to manage international pledges toward reconstruction. Without the PA's involvement, international organizations and governments generally have less confidence that they can prevent Hamas from diverting assistance for its own purposes.[36] Some Arab Gulf states may seek to establish independent committees inside Gaza to distribute funds, modeled after one that Qatar maintains.[37]

Human Rights Considerations: ICC Investigation and U.S. Aid

International public debate has taken place over alleged Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians. The International Criminal Court prosecutor announced the opening of an investigation in March into possible crimes in the West Bank and Gaza.[38] The investigation might draw from the findings of an ongoing commission of inquiry established by the U.N. Human Rights Council in May in the wake of the recent Israel-Gaza conflict.[39] The U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva issued a statement saying that the "open-ended" commission of inquiry would "not help bring about lasting solutions to the challenges in the region, nor provide greater dignity, freedom, or prosperity for either Palestinians or Israelis."[40] The Biden Administration, like its predecessors, has criticized the Human Rights Council for what it characterizes as a disproportionate focus on Israel.[41]

In April a bill was introduced in the House (H.R. 2590) that would not reduce or condition the amount of U.S. aid provided to Israel, but could place limits on its use in relation to some of those human rights allegations.[42] Later in April, 330 Representatives wrote a letter to the chair and ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee arguing against reducing funding or adding conditions on security assistance to Israel,[43] citing a similar argument that President Biden made during the 2020 presidential race.[44]

Arab State Normalization with Israel

To date, the Biden Administration has not reversed steps that the Trump Administration took in apparent connection with Israel's recent agreements to normalize or improve relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco (known as the "Abraham Accords").[45] Biden Administration

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Adnan Abu Amer, "Gaza reconstruction deepens PA-Hamas dispute," May 28, 2021.

[38] CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

[39] U.N. document, A/HRC/S-30/L.1, as orally revised, May 27, 2021.

[40] U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Press Statement: UN Human Rights Council Session on the Israeli-Palestinian Situation," May 27, 2021.

[41] U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Secretary Blinken: Remarks to the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council," February 24, 2021.

[42] "Human Rights Watch accuses Israel of apartheid over treatment of Palestinians," *Associated Press*, April 27, 2021 (underlying Human Rights Watch report available at https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution, with the State Department's 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Israel, West Bank and Gaza available at https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/).

[43] Text of letter available at https://teddeutch.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2021.04.21_mou_letter_delauro_granger_signed.pdf.

[44] Omri Nahmias, "Biden: Israeli threats of annexation choke off hope of peace," jpost.com, May 20, 2020.

[45] These steps include a proposed U.S. sale to the UAE of F-35s, drone aircraft, and munitions; Sudan's removal from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list; and U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty claims over the disputed

officials have said that any further U.S. efforts to assist Israel's normalization efforts with Arab states would seek to preserve the viability of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian leaders denounced the Abraham Accords as an abandonment of the Palestinian national cause, given Arab states' previous insistence that Israel address Palestinian negotiating demands as a precondition for improved ties.[46]

The Pathway to the Abraham Accords, and Its Implications for Palestinians

Before the Abraham Accords, Egypt and Jordan had been the only Arab states with formal diplomatic relations with Israel.[47] In 1981, Saudi Arabia's then-Crown Prince Fahd bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud proposed a formula—later enshrined in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API)—under which Israel would make certain concessions, including on Palestinian statehood, before Arab states would normalize their relations with it.[48] After Israel started negotiating directly with the Palestinians in the 1990s, it established limited diplomatic relations with Morocco, and informal ties with a number of other Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain.[49] These countries downgraded their ties with Israel after the onset of the second Palestinian *intifada* (or uprising) in 2000. However, in the past decade discreet Israeli links with Arab states on issues including intelligence, security, and trade have become closer and more public. Israel has worked with these countries to counter common concerns, such as Iran's regional influence and military capabilities (see "Iran and the Region" below) and Sunni Islamist populist movements (including various Muslim Brotherhood branches and affiliates).[50]

To cement its normalization of relations with the UAE, Israel agreed in August 2020 to suspend plans to annex part of the West Bank, with one source stating that the UAE received a commitment from U.S. officials that they would not approve Israeli annexation until at least January 2024. Palestinian leaders claimed that the UAE legitimized Israel's annexation threats by bargaining over them, and thus acquiesced to a West Bank status quo that some observers label "de facto annexation."[51] UAE officials countered that by significantly delaying Israeli declarations of sovereignty over West Bank areas, they preserved prospects for future negotiations toward a Palestinian state.[52] Since announcing the suspension of annexation plans, Israeli officials have appealed to domestic pro-settler constituencies with a number of announcements related to settlement construction and expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Official statements from Saudi Arabian officials continue to condition Saudi normalization with Israel on the API's provisions.[53] Some key Saudi figures—possibly including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—may be willing to drop or ease preconditions for Saudi-Israel normalization that relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Specific

territory of Western Sahara.

[46] Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, "Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal," *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

[47] Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979, and Jordan and Israel did the same in 1994.

[48] The Arab Peace Initiative offers a comprehensive Arab peace with Israel if Israel were to withdraw fully from the territories it occupied in 1967, agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem, and provide for the "[a]chievement of a just solution to the Palestinian Refugee problem in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194." The initiative was proposed by Saudi Arabia and adopted by the 22-member League of Arab States in 2002, and later accepted by the then-56-member Organization of the Islamic Conference (now the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation) at its 2005 Mecca summit. The text of the initiative is available at http://www.bitterlemons.org/docs/summit.html.

[49] Miriam Berger, "Israel's relations in the Middle East, explained," washingtonpost.com, August 15, 2020; Adam Entous, "Donald Trump's New World Order," *New Yorker*, June 11, 2018; CRS Report 95-1013, *Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[50] Steve Hendrix, "Inside the secret-not-secret courtship between Israel and the United Arab Emirates," washingtonpost.com, August 14, 2020; CRS Report 95-1013, *Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[51] Walid Mahmoud and Muhammad Shehada, "Palestinians unanimously reject UAE-Israel deal," *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020.

[52] "UAE minister: We bought lot of time on annexation; Palestinians should negotiate," *Times of Israel*, August 14, 2020.

[53] HRH Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, First Plenary Session, International Institute for Strategic Studies Manama Dialogue, December 5, 2020.

incentives to do so could include heightened regional cooperation on Iran, U.S. offers of advanced arms, prospects to boost Saudi economic diversification, and greater Saudi influence over Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.[54]

Israeli normalization with Arab states could raise questions about the future of cooperation and rivalry among key actors in the Middle East. Depending on global and regional geopolitical trends, common cause could intensify, dwindle, or fluctuate between Israel and some Arab states to counter Iran and perhaps even Turkey and Qatar, two countries that provide some support for Sunni Islamist movements. In January 2021, President Trump ordered U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which commands U.S. military forces in most countries in the Middle East, to add Israel to its area of responsibility, partly to encourage military interoperability as a means of reinforcing closer ties between Israel and many Arab states.[55] Israel had previously been under the purview of U.S. European Command. While closer cooperation may result between Israel and some Arab governments, some others that have not normalized relations with Israel might encounter political challenges in joining CENTCOM deliberations involving Israel.

Other factors influencing regional cooperation and rivalry might include the following:

- **Arms sales.** Shortly after the UAE's normalization deal with Israel, the Trump Administration notified Congress of a proposed sale to the UAE of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, armed MQ-9 Reaper drones, and munitions.[56] While noting the U.S. legal requirement to maintain Israel's QME, Israeli officials stated that they would not oppose the sale. The United States and UAE reportedly signed a letter of offer and acceptance for the sale in the final hours of the Trump Administration.[57] Implementing the deal and delivering the items is expected to take years. The outcome of this transaction and others that might follow to Arab states in connection with normalization could depend on issues including QME considerations, human rights concerns (such as those involved in Yemen's ongoing conflict), and prospects for regional arms races involving suppliers such as Russia and China.[58]
- **Mutual economic benefits.** Wider access to markets, technology sharing, and road or rail infrastructure linking the Gulf with the Mediterranean are some of the potential economic benefits of expanded Israel-Arab relations.[59] Gulf states may feel urgency to attract investment that could help them diversify their fossil-fuel export-centered economies, and many regional countries may anticipate the need

[54] Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel," Institute for National Security Studies, Insight No. 1396, October 29, 2020.

[55] Jared Szuba, "Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift," *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2021.

[56] Defense Security Cooperation Agency Transmittals 21-01, 21-03, and 21-05, November 10, 2020.

[57] Valerie Insinna, "Just hours before Biden's inauguration, the UAE and US come to a deal on F-35 sales," *Defense News*, January 20, 2021.

[58] CRS Report R46580, *Israel's Qualitative Military Edge and Possible U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates*, coordinated by Jeremy M. Sharp and Jim Zanotti.

[59] The Israel-UAE treaty signed in September 2020 says, "Recognizing also their shared goal to advance regional economic development and the flow of goods and services, the Parties shall endeavor to promote collaborations on strategic regional infrastructure projects and shall explore the establishment of a multilateral working group for the 'Tracks for Regional Peace' project." The Israeli foreign ministry released a proposal for this project, a rail line from Israel to Saudi Arabia and the UAE via the West Bank and Jordan, in August 2019. A major part of its appeal would be allowing the participant countries to bypass the two major chokepoints of the Strait of Hormuz (Persian Gulf) and Bab al-Mandab (Red Sea). See Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Tracks for regional peace—regional land bridge and hub initiative," August 5, 2019.

to boost their appeal as trade and investment partners in light of new opportunities amid increased global competition (including between the United States and China) for markets, resources, and infrastructure projects. Additionally, UAE sovereign wealth fund Mubadala signed a memorandum of understanding in April 2021 to purchase a stake in Israel's Tamar offshore natural gas field. Section 1279 of the U.S.-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act of 2020 (Title XII, Subtitle H of the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 116-283) authorized the establishment of a program to support Arab-Israeli cooperation on innovation and advanced technologies.

- **Arab public opinion.** Arab state leaders considering entering into or maintaining normalization with Israel might gauge whether expected benefits from normalization would outweigh concerns about popular criticism or unrest they might face for possibly undermining the Palestinian cause.[60] Public opinion polls from the past decade suggest relatively unchanging and widespread Arab opposition to diplomatic recognition of Israel.[61] Normalization efforts to date have not triggered significant unrest, but outside insight is limited into public opinion, its drivers, and how popular reactions are shaped by the nature of authoritarian Arab regimes. It is unclear whether Gulf populations with no direct history of armed conflict with Israel might be more willing to accept pragmatic cooperation with Israel than those in Egypt, Jordan, and other countries who have fought Israel in the past.

Iran and the Region

Israeli officials cite Iran as one of their primary concerns, largely because of (1) antipathy toward Israel expressed by Iran's revolutionary regime, (2) Iran's broad regional influence (especially in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon),[62] and (3) Iran's nuclear and missile programs and advanced conventional weapons capabilities. Israeli observers who anticipate the possibility of a future war similar or greater in magnitude to Israel's 2006 war against Lebanese Hezbollah refer to the small-scale military skirmishes or covert actions since then involving Israel, Iran, or their allies as the "the campaign between wars."[63]

Iranian Nuclear Issue and Regional Tensions

Israel has sought to influence U.S. decisions on the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). Then-Prime Minister Netanyahu opposed the JCPOA in 2015 when it was negotiated by the Obama Administration, and welcomed President Trump's May 2018 withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and accompanying reimposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran's core economic sectors. Facing the intensified U.S. sanctions, Iran has reduced its compliance with the 2015 agreement.

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[60] See, for example, Jared Malsin and Amira al-Fekki, "Egypt's 'Cold Peace' a Harbinger for Region," *Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2020.

[61] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief*, Figure 88, available at https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Arab-Opinion-Index-2019-2020-Inbreef-English-Version.pdf.

[62] For information on this topic, see CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[63] See, for example, Efraim Inbar, "Iran and Israel: The Inevitable War?" Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, January 6, 2021.

U.S.-Iran tensions since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA have led to greater regional uncertainty, with implications for Israel.[64] Some Israelis have voiced worries about how Iran's demonstrated ability in 2019 to penetrate Saudi air defenses and target Saudi oil facilities could transfer to efforts in targeting Israel.[65] In January 2021, one source claimed there was evidence that Iran has transferred advanced drones (loitering munitions) capable of targeting Israel or Arab Gulf states to the Iran-supported Houthi movement in Yemen.[66] Additionally, reported low-level Israel-Iran conflict in various settings—cyberspace, international waters, and the territory of other regional countries—has further exacerbated regional tensions.[67]

As the Biden Administration engages in international diplomacy to consider possibly reentering the JCPOA, Israel—whose officials are generally skeptical of U.S. reentry—is one of several regional U.S. partners voicing interest in having its views taken into account.[68] Just before his installation as prime minister, Naftali Bennett said to the Knesset, "Resuming a nuclear deal with Iran is a mistake that will legitimize one of the world's most violent regimes."[69]

Some observers have speculated that Israeli covert or military operations might influence or disrupt diplomacy on the nuclear issue.[70] It is unclear whether the June government transition may affect this dynamic. An April 2021 explosion and power outage—widely attributed to Israel—that reportedly disabled thousands of centrifuges at Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment facility led Iran to begin enriching uranium to 60 percent purity, closer to weapons-grade levels.[71]

Hezbollah

Lebanese Hezbollah is Iran's closest and most powerful non-state ally in the region. Hezbollah's forces and Israel's military have sporadically clashed near the Lebanese border for decades—with the antagonism at times contained in the border area, and at times escalating into broader conflict.[72] Speculation persists about the potential for wider conflict and its regional implications.[73] Israeli officials have sought to draw attention to Hezbollah's buildup of mostly

[64] See, for example, CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas.

[65] Uzi Even, "Iran Attack on Saudi Arabia Shows Why Israel Must Shut Down Its Nuclear Reactor," haaretz.com, October 6, 2019.

[66] Tom O'Connor, "Exclusive: Iran Positions 'Suicide Drones' in Yemen as Red Sea Tensions Rise," *Newsweek*, January 13, 2021.

[67] "Fighting in the Shadows: Israel and Iran," Soufan Center, March 30, 2021; Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Has Israel been sabotaging Iran? Here's what we know," washingtonpost.com, July 15, 2020.

[68] See also Yaniv Kubovich and Judy Maltz, "Israel's Chief of Staff: Return to Iran Deal Is 'Wrong,' Military Action 'Should Be on the Table,'" haaretz.com, January 27, 2021.

[69] Noa Shpigel, "Incoming PM Bennett Says Resuming Iran Nuclear Deal Would Be Mistake in Knesset Address," haaretz.com, June 13, 2021.

[70] Daniel C. Kurtzer, Aaron David Miller, and Steven N. Simon, "Israel and Iran Are Pulling the United States Toward Conflict," foreignaffairs.com, April 26, 2021; Efraim Inbar and Eran Lerman, "The ramifications of a US return to the 2015 Iran deal—opinion," jpost.com, April 28, 2021.

[71] "Iran Begins 60 Percent Uranium Enrichment After Natanz Attack, Top Negotiator Says," haaretz.com (with content from *Associated Press* and *Reuters*), April 13, 2021.

[72] CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud; CRS In Focus IF10703, *Lebanese Hezbollah*, by Carla E. Humud.

[73] For possible conflict scenarios, see Nicholas Blanford and Assaf Orion, *Counting the cost: Avoiding another war between Israel and Hezbollah*, *Atlantic Council*, May 13, 2020; Hanin Ghaddar, "How Will Hezbollah Respond to Israel's Drone Attack?" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policywatch 3171, August 28, 2019.

Iran-supplied weapons—including reported upgrades to the range, precision, and power of its projectiles—and its alleged use of Lebanese civilian areas as strongholds.[74]

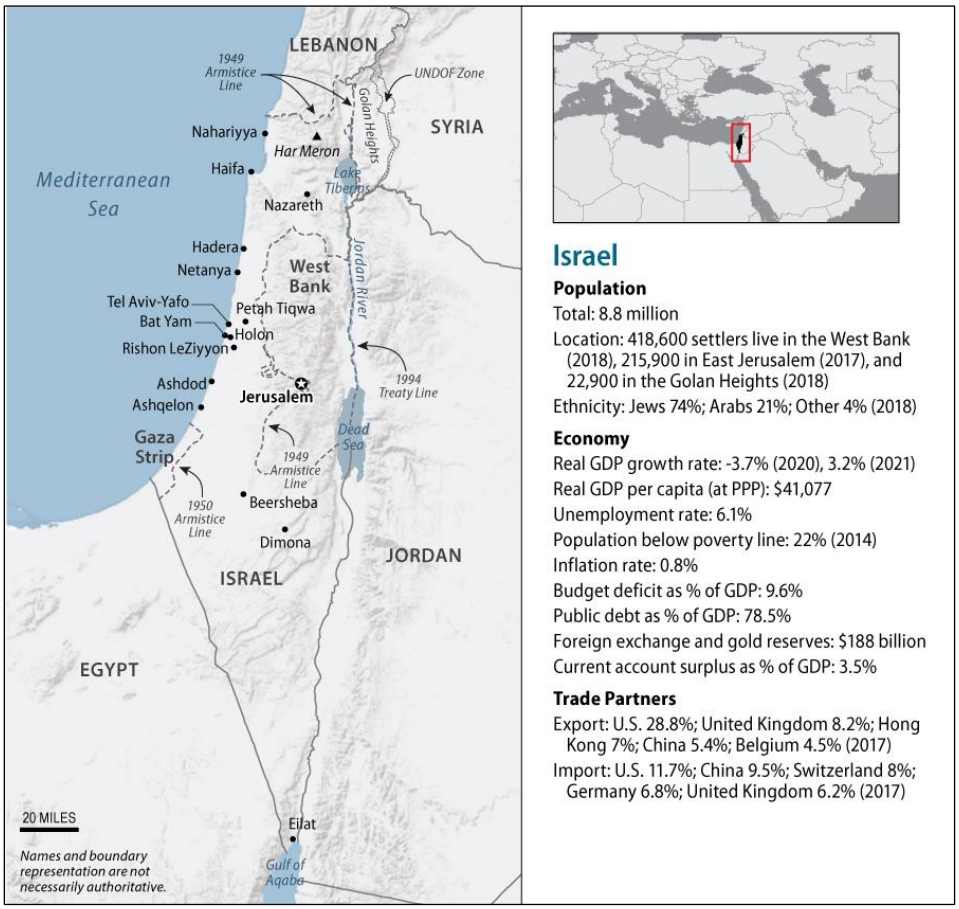
Ongoing tension between Israel and Iran raises questions about the potential for Israel-Hezbollah conflict. Various sources have referenced possible Iran-backed Hezbollah attempts to build precision-weapons factories in Lebanon.[75] Some reports assess that Hezbollah does not want escalation, partly due to significant political and economic problems in Lebanon, but do not rule out the potential for heightened conflict owing to miscalculation between Hezbollah and Israel.[76]

[74] See, for example, "Hezbollah says it has doubled its arsenal of guided missiles," *Associated Press*, December 28, 2020; Ben Hubbard and Ronen Bergman, "Who Warns Hezbollah That Israeli Strikes Are Coming? Israel," *New York Times*, April 23, 2020.

[75] "Hezbollah says it has doubled its arsenal of guided missiles," *Associated Press*; Ben Caspit, "Hezbollah, Israel losing red lines," *Al-Monitor*, September 4, 2019.

[76] See, for example, Amos Harel, "For Hezbollah, Beirut Devastation Makes Provoking Israel Even Riskier," haaretz.com, August 6, 2020.

Appendix A. Israel: Map and Basic Facts



Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated by Hannah Fischer using Department of State Boundaries (2017); Esri (2013); the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency GeoNames Database (2015); DeLorme (2014). Fact information from CIA, *The World Factbook*; and Economist Intelligence Unit. All numbers are forecasts for 2021 unless otherwise specified.

Notes: According to the U.S. executive branch: (1) The West Bank is Israeli occupied with current status subject to the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement; permanent status to be determined through further negotiation. (2) The status of the Gaza Strip is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations. (3) The United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 without taking a position on the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty. (4) Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative. Additionally, the United States recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019; however, U.N. Security Council Resolution 497, adopted on December 17, 1981, held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel's military is occupied territory belonging to Syria. The current U.S. executive branch map of Israel is available at https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/israel/map.

Appendix B. Israeli Political Parties in the Knesset and Their Leaders

RIGHT

Likud (Consolidation) – 30 Knesset seats (Opposition)
Israel's historical repository of right-of-center nationalist ideology; skeptical of territorial compromise; has also championed free-market policies.

Leader: Binyamin Netanyahu
Born in 1949, Netanyahu served as prime minister from 2009 to June 2021, and also was prime minister from 1996 to 1999. Netanyahu served in an elite special forces unit (Sayeret Matkal), and received his higher education at MIT. Throughout a career in politics and diplomacy, he has been renowned both for his skepticism regarding the exchange of land for peace with the Palestinians and his desire to counter Iran's nuclear program and regional influence. He is generally regarded as both a consummate political dealmaker and a security-minded nationalist.

Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home) – 7 seats (Coalition)
Pro-secular, right-of-center nationalist party with base of support among Russian speakers from the former Soviet Union.

Leader: Avigdor Lieberman
Born in 1958, Lieberman is Israel's finance minister, and has previously served as defense minister and foreign minister. He is generally viewed as an ardent nationalist and canny political actor with prime ministerial aspirations. Lieberman was born in the Soviet Union (in what is now Moldova) and immigrated to Israel in 1978. He worked under Netanyahu from 1988 to 1997. Disillusioned by Netanyahu's willingness to consider concessions to the Palestinians, Lieberman founded Yisrael Beitenu as a platform for former Soviet immigrants. He was acquitted of corruption allegations in a 2013 case.

Yamina (Right) – 7 seats (Coalition)
Right-of-center merger of three parties: New Right, Jewish Home, and National Union; base of support among religious Zionists (mostly Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews); includes core constituencies supporting West Bank settlements and annexation.

Leader: Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (biography in text box in the main body of the report)

New Hope (Tikva Hadasha) – 6 seats (Coalition)

New Hope is a party formed in 2020 as an alternative to Prime Minister Netanyahu and Likud for mainstream right-wing voters.

Leader: Gideon Sa'ar
Born in 1966, Sa'ar serves as justice minister. He served as cabinet secretary in the 1990s (for Prime Minister Netanyahu) and early 2000s (for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon). He became an influential and popular member of Likud, first elected to the Knesset in 2003. He served as education minister from 2009 to 2013 and interior minister from 2013 to 2014. After leaving the Knesset in 2014, he returned in 2019 but left Likud to form New Hope a year later.

Religious Zionism (HaTzionut HaDatit) – 6 seats (Opposition)

Grouping of right-of-center parties including Religious Zionism/National Union-Tkuma, Otzma Yehudit, and Noam that formed for the March 2021elections.

Leader: Bezalel Smotrich

Born in 1980, Smotrich has headed the underlying party that leads Religious Zionism since 2019. A trained lawyer, he has engaged in regular activism to promote Jewish nationalist and religiously conservative causes.

LEFT

Labor (Avoda) – 7 seats (Coalition)

Labor is Israel's historical repository of social democratic, left-of-center, pro-secular Zionist ideology; associated with efforts to end Israel's responsibility for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Leader: Merav Michaeli

Born in 1966, Michaeli is transportation minister. She became Labor's leader in 2020 and was first elected to the Knesset in 2013. Before entering national politics, she founded and headed an organization that supports victims of sexual assault, and was a regular national media presence and university lecturer.

Meretz (Vigor) – 6 seats (Coalition)

Meretz is a pro-secular Zionist party that supports initiatives for social justice and peace with the Palestinians.

Leader: Nitzan Horowitz

Born in 1965, Horowitz is health minister. He became Meretz's leader in 2019 and was first elected to the Knesset in 2009. He had a long career as a prominent journalist before entering politics.

CENTER

Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) – 17 seats (Coalition)

Yesh Atid is a centrist party in existence since 2012 that has championed socioeconomic issues such as cost of living and has taken a pro-secular stance.

Leader: Yair Lapid

Born in 1963, Lapid is foreign minister and alternate prime minister. Under the government's power-sharing agreement, he is set to become prime minister in August 2023. He came to politics after a career as a journalist, television presenter, and author. He founded the Yesh Atid party in 2012, and from 2013 to 2014 he served as finance minister.

Kahol Lavan (Blue and White) – 8 seats (Coalition)

Centrist party formed in 2018 as an alternative to Prime Minister Netanyahu, ostensibly seeking to preserve long-standing Israeli institutions such as the judiciary, articulate a vision of Israeli nationalism that is more inclusive of Druze and Arab citizens, and have greater sensitivity to international opinion on Israeli-Palestinian issues.

Leader: Benny Gantz

Born in 1959, Gantz is Israel's defense minister. He served as Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces from 2011 to 2015.

ULTRA-ORTHODOX

Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians) – 9 seats (Opposition)
Mizrahi Haredi ("ultra-Orthodox") party; favors welfare and education funds in support of Haredi lifestyle; opposes compromise with Palestinians on control over Jerusalem.

Leader: Aryeh Deri
Born in 1959, Deri led Shas from 1983 to 1999 before being convicted for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust in 1999 for actions taken while serving as interior minister. He returned as the party's leader in 2013. In April 2021, he allowed a party colleague to take his Knesset seat.

United Torah Judaism – 7 seats (Opposition)
Ashkenazi Haredi coalition (Agudat Yisrael and Degel Ha'torah); favors welfare and education funds in support of Haredi lifestyle; opposes territorial compromise with Palestinians and conscription of Haredim; generally seeks greater application of Jewish law.

Leader: Yaakov Litzman
Born in 1948, Litzman was born in Germany and raised in the United States before immigrating to Israel in 1965. Educated in yeshivas (traditional Jewish schools), he later served as principal of a Hasidic girls' school in Jerusalem. In April 2021, he allowed a party colleague to take his Knesset seat.

ARAB

Joint List – 6 seats (Opposition)

Electoral slate featuring three Arab parties that combine socialist and Arab nationalist political strains: Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), Ta'al (Arab Movement for Renewal), and Balad (National Democratic Assembly).

Leader: Ayman Odeh
Born in 1975, Odeh is the leader of Hadash, an Arab Israeli socialist party, and of the Joint List. An attorney, he served on the Haifa city council before becoming Hadash's national leader in 2006.

United Arab List (UAL or Ra'am) – 4 seats (Coalition)

Islamist Arab party that embodies conservative social values while seeking state support to improve Arabs' socioeconomic position within Israel.

Leader: Mansour Abbas
Born in 1974, Abbas has led the UAL since 2007 and is a qualified dentist.

Sources: Various open sources.

Note: Knesset seat numbers based on results from the March 23, 2021, election.

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