

**Historical Reflections. Israel And Its Neighbors 2001–2011: A Decade of Security and
Diplomatic Cooperation**

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Introduction

Over the past decade the Middle East has been in political, security, and economic crisis due to the largely unresolved turmoil unleashed by the Arab Spring and the resurgence of terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and Daesh. While there will be no immediate end to this situation, it is clear individual security is the key to wider trust and dialogue, a shift that is already gradually taking place. With the geographic demise of Daesh and other groups across the region, more communities are regaining their own security and way of life. From security stems cooperation and economic stability and we therefore must look at instances in recent regional history where security and collaboration has taken root.

Media analysts tend to evaluate the Arab-Israeli relationship as inherently conflicted, but it is important to look at the significant amount of evidence that shows cooperation between the two sides in the security field, particularly during the period between 2001 and 2011. This period coincided with growing US involvement in the Middle East but ultimately also with the emergence of a universally accepted common enemy: terrorism.

Today, the common enemy remains. Joint efforts undertaken by Israel and its near neighbors to combat it between during the first decade post 9/11 represent pieces of a model that could emerge once more in the years ahead. Many of the factors that led to this security cooperation have not gone away but persist in different forms. Here, I evaluate academic and media analysis of Israel's security relations over this period, comparing it with previous decades, and offer an optimistic assessment for a return to regional security cooperation.

In the years leading up to September 11, 2001, the Middle East was fragmented, with key regional actors motivated by self-interest and realpolitik.¹ As Fred Halliday rightly concludes, the 2001 attack on New York and the 2003 Iraq War were the culmination of tensions both within Middle Eastern societies and at the inter-state level of relations.² Among a number of factors, these tensions were born out of the unresolved Arab-Israeli dispute as well as a growing disdain toward Western political interventionism in the region. A persistent lack of progress in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the attendant humiliation and deprivation of stateless Palestinians (epitomized by Israel and Egypt's blockade of Gaza), seemed to preclude meaningful security cooperation.³ However, with the increase of terrorism across the region and the west that began to take on steam in the 1990s, the security dynamic revealed the need to strike new alliances to combat an unconventional enemy.

Israel's history has been characterised by a series of conflicts with its neighbors ever since the independent state was created. It is reasonable to say Israel has been both victim and perpetrator of the violence that succeeded its independence in 1948, as all parties strove to establish a post-World War order. The objectives, or core goals, of Israeli foreign policy have been to achieve peace and security in a hostile region, universal recognition and acceptance, and economic well-being.⁴ While Israel has had limited success with some of these goals globally, the region remained unconvinced, particularly those substate groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas which stand against coexistence at any cost.

Still, what is interesting about the first decade of the twenty-first century is that even despite the Israeli incursions into Lebanon and Gaza, there were formal efforts between Israel

¹ Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History since the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 190.

² Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics, and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 131.

³ Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan, Graeme P. Herd, and Lisa Watanabe, *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East 1905–2015* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 170.

⁴ Bernard Reich, "Israeli Foreign Policy," in L. Carl Brown, ed., *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004), 121.

and its neighbors to end the violence and normalise terms. Certainly, these efforts were complicated by the outrage that Israel's actions inspired in the societies with which its relations were nominally warming, but the point is here that that despite these stress factors the relationships did in fact somewhat improve, on the security front in particular.

Positive Developments: Jordan and Egypt as Primary Actors

The late 1990s would see Jordan become one of Israel's key targets of influence, despite the previous direct conflict. The Hashemite Kingdom lacks strategic depth and shares borders with historically aggressive states; as a result, it has been the beneficiary of US military support. Jordan's approach toward ensuring its own security, therefore, has been one of bringing stability to its borders, in which the Israel-Palestine conflict is a key component. Indeed, early on in his reign, King Abdullah, continuing the policy of his father, King Hussein, openly acknowledged the importance of improved relations with Israel.⁵ After 9/11, the country sought vocally to refocus US attention to the issue, positioning itself as an active supporter of the two-state solution.⁶ This perspective allowed for the potential of a new approach to the growing security problems post-2001, a decade whose spirit of cooperation could be summarized in the Jordanian king's 2011 statement that "an isolated Israel and an insecure Israel [is not] a healthy thing for any of us [so] let's solve [the differences] now while we've all got our heads above the water as opposed to the quagmire we might find ourselves in four, five years from now."⁷

Meanwhile, Egypt began also to prioritize the stability of its northern border, opening a dialogue with Israel.⁸ Despite the encouraging signs developing out of the 1990s on this front, the Israeli government continued to recognise the fragility of these fledgling relations:

⁵ Nigel Ashton, *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 319.

⁶ Samaan Jean-Loup Samaan, "Jordan's New Geopolitics," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 54, no 2 (2012): 18–19.

⁷ King Abdullah Interview Transcript, The Washington Post, (15 June 2011), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/king-abdullah-interview-transcript/2011/06/15/AGHQpjWH_story.html.

⁸ Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., *Modern Egypt: The Transformation of a Nation State*, 2nd edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 187.

Contrary to expectation, the peace between Israel and Egypt is not a warm peace. There are certainly a number of areas in which relations can be improved, whether in regard to the ties between the peoples, trade ties and relations between the political leaders of both countries. Nevertheless, the peace between Israel and Egypt has withstood difficult challenges, proving that despite the many obstacles, Israeli-Arab coexistence can be accomplished.⁹

However, overriding the bursts of violence and the longer standing cultural differences was the region's desire for peace. For example, despite Egyptian anger toward repeatedly reported Israeli violations in Gaza from 2006 to 2008, the government of Hosni Mubarak led the efforts to broker an official ceasefire with the Palestinians.¹⁰ Egypt had already expressed its wish for a peaceful resolution when it hosted the first Israeli-Palestinian summit since 2001, an event that resulted in the formal resumption of diplomatic dialogue.¹¹

Counterterrorism

To be sure, even before 9/11, terrorism was endemic to the Middle East, with Israel in particular being highly experienced by that point at tackling insurgency and (state sponsored) terrorism with varying degrees of aggression. Yet 9/11 demonstrated unequivocally that Israel's neighbors share(d) similar concerns, especially as they themselves were not immune from insurgent activity during the decade under consideration. For example, the Sinai Peninsula emerged as a hotbed of terrorism, with Red Sea resorts filled with Israeli tourists becoming a key target.¹² Consequently, Egypt became a vital counterterrorism partner for

⁹ <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/bilateral+relations>.

¹⁰ Noam Comsky and Pappé Ilan, *Gaza in Crisis: Reflections on Israel's War Against the Palestinians* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 188.

¹¹ Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East: Continuity and Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 271.

¹² Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Masot, *A History of Egypt: From the Arab Conquest to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 176.

Israel, with the security of the Israel-Egyptian border a shared focus. In 2011 Wikileaks revealed the diplomatic interactions between the two states and the US, which confirmed counterterrorism cooperation on the border with Gaza.¹³ Together, Israel and Egypt built a 70 km security fence along the length of their border and conducted joint action to locate and destroy the smuggling tunnels that helped arm Gaza militants. There were even occasions of intelligence sharing on official visits between Cairo and Tel Aviv.¹⁴

Similarly, while regional counterterrorism cooperation between Israel and Jordan existed prior to 2001, it increased over the following decade, as both sides faced increased violence, smuggling, or other clandestine activity moving across borders.¹⁵ During this period, Al Qaeda had a significant presence in Jordan and Egypt, with the group having attacked Israeli tourists and interests. Jordanian police, with assistance from Egypt and Israel's Mossad, were instrumental in combatting such threats at this time.¹⁶ Israel and Jordan's security relationship went even deeper, with an understanding that Israel would provide military assistance to Jordan's internal security should the latter feel its national security were under threat.¹⁷ Despite this not being formally announced, and as unlikely as this scenario might be, it is evidence of Israel and its Jordan's growing need for stability and prioritization of cooperation over conflict during this time.

Back-channel dialogue also led to the furtherance of an Israeli-Turkish security alliance already in the 1990s, before it was interrupted for a time by the Second Intifada in late 2000 and later further undermined by Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon in 2006. This alliance,

¹³ Mark Landler and Andrew W. Lehren, "Cables Show Delicate US Dealings with Egypt's Leaders," in Alexander Star, ed., *Open Secrets: Wikileaks, War, and American Diplomacy* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 97.

¹⁴ Ismael and Ismael, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East*, 377.

¹⁵ Igor Primoratz "Terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," in Stephen Law, ed., *Israel, Palestine, and Terror* (London: Continuum International Publishing: London), 59.

¹⁶ "Jordanian Police Kill 'Militants,'" at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3642847.stm (April 21, 2004).

¹⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 161.

which persisted despite the abovementioned issues in the post-2001 decade, was a marriage of convenience for both sides, sustained partly by the mutual perception of Syria as a security threat and the rise of regional terror groups. Like Israel, Turkey was highly conscious of the growing instability in the region caused by the Iraq War, and western intervention against Bush's proclaimed "Axis of Evil." Substantial military and security cooperation was maintained throughout the early 2000s, including a bilateral exercise from the Marmaris Aksaz Deniz naval base and combined conventional and counterterrorism exercises between Israel, Turkey, and United States forces in 2001. The formal Israeli-Turkish alliance became the first between Israel and any other Muslim nation.¹⁸ For several years, the agreement oversaw relative peace in the region, outside of the invasion of Iraq.

Finally, in terms of positive developments, it is also important to highlight that many Arab states, including Jordan and Egypt (and also Turkey) pledged some form of support to the US and UN led "Roadmap for Peace" in 2003. The final text, proposing a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via the creation of a Palestinian state living in peace with Israel, was released on April 30, 2003; while the process reached a deadlock early in its first phase and the plan was never implemented, the fact that it was supported by key neighbors of Israel belies the intractably negative nature of the Israeli-Arab relationship.

Impossible(?) Relationships: Lebanon and Syria

At first glance it may appear that Israel never remedied the hostilities with Lebanon and Syria during the time period under consideration. When it comes to the first, by July 2006, on-going skirmishes with Hizbollah had developed into a full-scale conflict, ultimately resulting in the deaths of a thousand civilians and devastating Lebanon's infrastructure. Rather than

¹⁸ Aluf Benn, "Without Egypt, Israel Will be Left With No Friends in the Middle East," at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/without-egypt-israel-will-be-left-with-no-friends-in-the-middle-east-1.339926> (January 29, 2011).

defeating Hizbollah and establishing a stable northern border, Israel only succeeded in creating a buffer zone and the security problem remained. Hizbollah claimed a victory and maintained its grip within Lebanon, while Israel received international condemnation for its heavy-handed approach.¹⁹

The relationship with Syria also remained seemingly intractable, the first issue being the possession of the Golan Heights, a strategically significant region with a commanding position on the Israeli–Syrian border. Complicating matters was Syria’s sponsorship of Hizbollah, which the Syrians confidently used as leverage, refusing to discuss the disarmament of the group unless the Israelis ceded the Golan Heights. ²⁰ Indeed, mistrust increased between Israel and Syria during this period, with Assad even going so far as to suggest Israel’s other neighbors were gradually becoming its political and economic satellites.²¹

At the same time, Israel and Syria did attempt to reconvene peace talks through Track II diplomatic channels in mid-2008, brokered by the Turkish government, and although no agreement could be found over Golan and Hizbollah the mere fact of these efforts served to somewhat diffuse the security situation.²²

Nuclear Thaw?

While significant complexities remained during the first decade of the twenty-first century in Israel’s relations with its neighbors, it is evident from the examples above that diplomatic tensions had thawed to some extent by the turn of the decade. This would create the basis for further dialogue, particularly on mutual security interests but also, toward the end of the decade, around the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Allen Pigman, *Contemporary Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 129.

²⁰ G. R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.

²¹ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, “Syria and the Transition to Peace,” in Robert Freedman, ed., *The Middle East and the Peace Process: The Impact of the Oslo Accords* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 146.

²² Ismael and Ismael, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East*, 258.

The threat of a nuclear Israel has been historically a serious issue throughout the Middle East. Iran's and Syria's objections aside, Egypt has been particularly vocal in its attempts to persuade Israel to sign on to the UN Non-Proliferation Treaty.²³ In the region, the fear isn't so much that Israel will use the weapons; rather, the concern is that their existence adds more fuel to an already existing Middle Eastern arms race, making non-nuclear conflict that much more likely. In this context, Syria, Jordan, and Iran each made attempts to develop nuclear technology spanning from the 1990s to the present day, and while these were predominantly for domestic, peaceful purposes the attempts to do so in turn increased Israel's insecurities. Despite an increase in global oil prices starting in 2005 and the consequent efforts by countries to seek alternative energy sources, Israel was adamant they would not tolerate attempts by its neighbors to go nuclear. For example, according to King Abdullah of Jordan, Israel pressured both France and South Korea to abandon their energy assistance to Jordan in 2010 because of the perceived fear Israel held of a new nuclear neighbor.²⁴ In 2007, Israel's opposition to Syrian attempts to develop nuclear technology was more violent, involving targeted airstrikes after US intelligence reported there to be a covert nuclear reactor under construction.²⁵

However, after 2010, Israel started to shift its position as relations improved with its neighbors. When Syria announced it would restart its plans to develop nuclear energy technology, Israel did not aggressively oppose it in the first instance. It even took part in debates concerning non-proliferation, while remaining insistent that serious steps would need to be taken should Syrian or Iranian nuclear programmes have reached an advanced stage. For many commentators, Israel's readiness to openly discuss nuclear power and its own fears was considered an important, and fruitful, message given Israel's dependence on deterrence.

²³ Louis J. Cantari, "Egypt at the Crossroads: Domestic, Economic, and Political Stagnation and Foreign Policy Constraints," Freedman, *The Middle East and the Peace Process*, 162.

²⁴ "Israel Blocks Jordan Nuclear Bid, King Abdullah Says," at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10321361> (June 15, 2010).

²⁵ "Israel and Syria Announce Nuclear Energy Ambitions," at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8558160.stm> (March 9, 2010).

For Israel to take such a step meant there was clearly deeper cooperation moving under the surface, cooperation that would occasionally come out into the open. Track II diplomacy methods started to bear more fruit than conventional diplomatic channels. In support of the 1990s peace process, Egypt became a key partner to Israel when it sponsored a trilateral (Egypt, Israel, and Palestine) arms control project led by an Egyptian-born law professor and aimed at finding workable trust-building initiatives and alternatives to nuclear weapons.²⁶ On weapons of mass destruction disarmament more broadly, the Middle Eastern Chemical Risks Consortium was created, which since 2003 has facilitated regional cooperation against biological attacks and natural disease outbreaks. Made up of Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian non-government participants, it came to an immediate agreement over the illegal usage of chemical weapons.²⁷

Conclusion

Track II diplomacy undoubtedly made its own worthy contribution toward the thawing security relationship between Israel and its neighbors during the period 2001 to 2011.²⁸ Unfortunately, by the Arab Spring in 2011 and the chaotic struggles that ensued within the region's Arab states, progress and optimism diminished. In the years that followed, democracy struggled to take hold across the region and the proliferation of conflict close to Israel's borders forced it into an isolationist approach.

2001 to 2011 might have been littered by smaller conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza, but there were diplomatic efforts to forge a more cooperative existence between Israel and its near neighbors. However, while these efforts came to a premature end, there remain opportunities

²⁶ Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track II Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

to build on what was achieved before. The Middle East will emerge from this current conflict and political dynamics will change. The regional dynamic is already far different to that of 2011 and offers significant scope for renewed will between Israel and its neighbors to create a new security dialogue, particularly in the context of the conclusion of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts.