

Israel's Place in the Middle Eastern Balance of Power

by Hilal Khashan - July 20, 2022

Since Israel came into existence in 1948, every U.S. president has expressed unwavering support for its survival and well-being. On July 14, U.S. President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid signed the Jerusalem Declaration, in which the U.S. officially committed itself to Israel's security, a long-sought demand by Israeli politicians. Specifically, both countries committed to preventing Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon and ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge over other countries in the region.

Israel believes its security rests on maintaining this edge and preventing other countries from challenging its regional hegemony. However, the rise of Iran as a regional power and its ambitious nuclear program seriously threaten Israel's dominance. The head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations recently announced that his country was a nuclear threshold state – meaning it has the capability to produce nuclear weapons but chooses not to. Israel cannot live in a region where another country has an equal deterrent capability and will do whatever is necessary to eliminate the threat despite the U.S.' recent assurances.

Israel's Potential Course of Attack on Iran Nuclear Facilities



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Arms Procurement

Israel's military edge is in part a result of its procurement of arms from allied states – though some have been more supportive than others. In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Operation Balak helped Israel secure vital military hardware, primarily S-199 fighters, from Czechoslovakia, ensuring its triumph over the Arab League's armies. The covert operation aimed at overriding the U.S. State Department's arms embargo on the combatants. In recognition of its impact, Israel's first prime minister and founding father, David Ben-Gurion, acknowledged that "without these weapons, we [the Israelis] wouldn't have survived."

Britain maintained a tight arms export policy on Israel during the 1950s to avoid antagonizing Arab countries, especially its Hashemite allies in Iraq and Jordan. London had a keen interest in winning Arab support to join an anti-Soviet military pact and ensuring that Israel would not escalate its military operations against Jordan in response to guerrilla attacks from the West Bank. Britain's moderate approach to military exports to the region benefited Arabs more than Israelis. Israel demanded that Britain treat Arab countries as one entity and divide its sale of arms, especially

artillery units, to them equally. The British rejected the Israeli proposal, insisting that Arab unity didn't exist. They argued that Israel had twice as many artillery units as any Arab country and that the balance of power already favored Israel, a position also held by Washington.

Britain's objective was to avoid excessively strengthening Israel's military capabilities. It also refused to provide Israel with Centurion tanks – offering only scrap Sherman tanks – although it made them available to Egypt. This approach disappointed Ben-Gurion, who viewed it as anti-Israeli. Britain agreed to sell Israel the Centurions only after the Suez War began, though it declined Israel's request to purchase the state-of-the-art Chieftain tanks in 1969. Even when Ben-Gurion agreed to participate in the Suez campaign, Britain refused to supply Israel with parachutes because it didn't want to support Israel's efforts to develop its paratrooper units. The British resented the French decision to give Israel Nord Noratlas transport aircraft.

In 1952, the U.S., Britain and France set up the Near East Arms Coordinating Committee to regulate military sales to the countries directly involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The U.S. chose to refrain from supplying arms to the belligerents, understanding that London and Paris would impartially control their flow into the region. The British frequently complained about the French violating the terms of the NEACC in a way that favored Israel.

Unlike Britain, France expressed an eagerness to arm Israel. In 1954, it equipped the Israeli Air Force with Dassault Ouragan fighters, and after Egypt signed the Czech arms deal, France supplied the IAF with Dassault Mystere IV jets. Right after the Suez War, Israel received the Dassault Super Mystere fighters and Sud Aviation Vautour bombers. In 1962, Mirage III fighters gave the IAF a qualitative edge against Egyptian and Syrian air forces and ensured its stunning victory in the 1967 war.

The Soviets' massive 1955 arms deal with Egypt in which Czechoslovakia served as an intermediary included MiG-15 fighter jets, Ilyushin Il-28 light bombers, T-34 tanks and an assortment of other military gear and munitions. Israel feared that the supplies, which amounted to 80 percent of all arms shipments to the Middle East since 1950, would shift the balance of military power in Egypt's favor. This provided the rationale for Israel to agree to the Sevres Protocol with Britain and France to topple Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime in 1956.

America's Central Role

Throughout the 1950s, Israel tried unsuccessfully to convince the U.S. to supply it with military hardware. The U.S. argued that Israel could meet its arms needs with European suppliers without its

direct involvement. Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower chose not to engage directly in Middle Eastern affairs, preferring to delegate the responsibility to Britain.

But Israeli leaders believed that only Washington could guarantee Israel's security. They did not think highly of Britain and argued that France's commitment to Israel's survival was transient. They wanted proof of the United States' commitment to Israel's security. Partial proof came in 1962, when President John F. Kennedy provided Israel with Hawk surface-to-air missiles. Israel didn't need the Hawks because the IAF was superior to Arab air forces anyway, but many Israelis saw the move as a symbolic gesture of U.S. commitment to their security.

In the early 1960s, the U.S. used Germany to transfer surplus weaponry to Israel. The scheme divided German society, generated heated media debate and was eventually scrapped. The U.S. then started shipping arms directly to Israel, and in 1965, it supplied Israel with M-48 tanks.

On the eve of the 1967 war, French President Charles de Gaulle warned Israel against initiating hostilities after he received assurances from Nasser that Egypt would not fire the first shot. He imposed an arms embargo on Israel when he concluded that it had decided to start the war. In retrospect, the French ban was a blessing in disguise because the U.S. then became the primary source of military hardware to Israel, a long-desired objective of the Israeli government. The shift occurred during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. When Johnson asked the CIA about the military situation in the Middle East prior to the war's initiation, it assured him that Israel would win a decisive victory. Israel received the first Douglas A-4 Skyhawk bombers in 1968 and M-60 tanks in 1971.

The U.S. also demonstrated its commitment to Israel's survival in the initial stages of the 1973 war when Israel suffered significant fighter jet and tank losses. President Richard Nixon ordered a massive military airlift of urgently needed arms supplies directly to Sinai, even though the U.S. recognized it as occupied territory. Since 1973, the strength of U.S.-Israeli relations has been institutionalized. This has remained true regardless of who has occupied the U.S. presidency. Even President Barack Obama, whom many Israelis didn't view as a friend of their country, authorized in 2016 a military aid package for Israel worth \$38 billion over 10 years, the most comprehensive U.S. aid package in history.

Israel's Military Doctrine

Israel's military doctrine consists of three components. The first is deterrence, which seeks to convince Israel's opponents that the cost of launching war against Israel would be prohibitively high. Israel's nuclear capability provided it with the ultimate military deterrence. Shimon Perez, deputy

director general of the Defense Ministry in the 1950s, used his strong connections with France to help develop Israel's nuclear program, and in 1958, Israel began constructing the Dimona atomic reactor. The second component is winning resounding military victories. If Israel's adversaries escalate militarily, it would seek to soundly defeat them so that they eventually renounce the use of violence and accept peace.

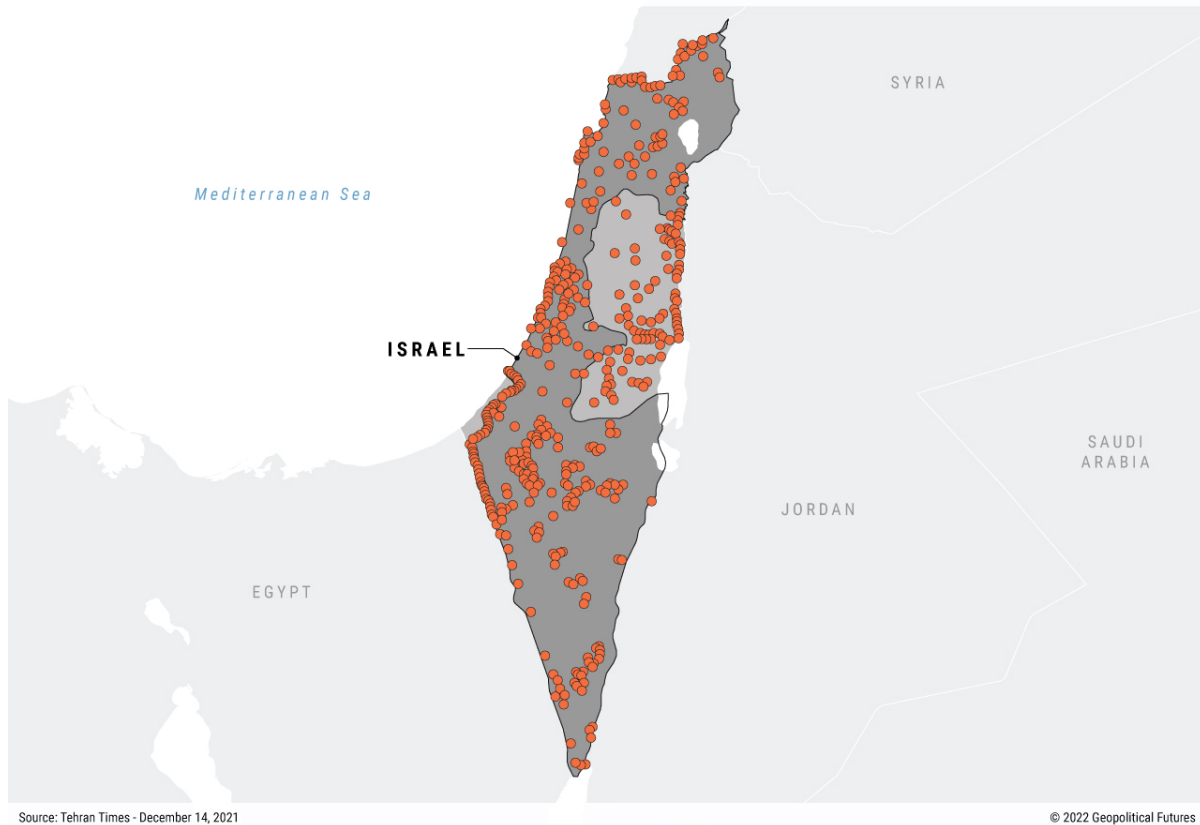
The third component is to launch preemptive strikes. Preemption has been a steady Israeli military policy since 1948. In 1954, Ben-Gurion predicted that Egypt would be ready to go to war in two years. When Cairo acquired the Soviet-built MiG-15 jets in 1955, he said he would destroy them before they became operational, which he did in collaboration with the British and French in 1956. Between 1964 and 1967, Israel staged a low-intensity campaign dubbed the War Over Water to prevent Syria and Jordan from diverting the tributaries of the Jordan River. In 1981, the IAF destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor.

Israel's challenges in acquiring arms during its first two decades of existence, in addition to its small size in terms of both land and population, convinced its political and military leadership to develop a technological edge over its Arab adversaries. It thus modernized its air force, which became a decisive military asset in wars against Arabs thanks to French arms deliveries during its first two decades in existence and more advanced U.S. aircraft thereafter. Israel's Military Industries Systems, initially established in 1933, grew into a world-class high-tech manufacturer by the turn of the 21st century. Israel ultimately emerged as a formidable and unmatched regional military power.

What's Next?

Israel takes Iran's claims about reaching the nuclear threshold seriously, whether or not Tehran actually intends to manufacture an atomic bomb. Since 1967, Israel has been the Middle East's dominant power, and it likely won't accept sharing regional hegemony with Iran. This is why it opposed the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and has constantly voiced its opposition to any new agreement.

Iran's Israeli Targets, Per Iran



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In 1950, the Arab world presented itself as Israel's existential threat. But in more recent years, Arab countries have abandoned military confrontation, and many established or are working toward establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. The Jerusalem Declaration perceives Iran as Israel's new threat. Unlike Arab countries, Iran aspires to become Israel's peer, an utterly unacceptable scenario for the Israelis. If the past and present predict the future, one must surmise that Israel will endeavor to eliminate the Iranian challenge. If it fails, we will witness the rise of a regional system that's more factious than ever.

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