
FRIENDS OF ISRAEL INITIATIVE

Is Israel Isolated More than Ever?

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Introduction

Israel's right to exist is questioned by many and its ancient capital, Jerusalem, is unrecognized by all but a few states. Israeli leaders are sometimes compared to leaders of Nazi Germany, and Israeli actions against the Palestinians described as Nazi-like policies. Moreover, Israel is accused of holding South African apartheid policies towards the Palestinians and its Arab minority. Opponents and critics portray Israel as the world's worst violator of human rights, UN resolutions, and international law. Many Israelis feel that Israel is once more alone and that the Jewish state is increasingly isolated in the international community. In accordance with an August 2010 poll, 56% of the Jewish public subscribed to the view that "The whole world is against us."¹ Even a larger majority, 77%, thought that it makes no difference what Israel does and how far it may go on the Palestinian issue; the world will continue to be very critical of it regardless.² The extensive media coverage of the April 2002 "Jenin Massacre" fabrications, the infamous Goldstone Report of September 2009, and the Gaza Freedom Flotilla of May 2010, inter alia, provided Israelis evidence of a hostile international reportage, buttressing their perceptions that Israel is under international siege.

In addition, several of Israel's political leaders are very concerned about Israel's international status. For example, in March 2011 Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned about a "diplomatic tsunami" if the standstill in peace talks with the Palestinian Authority (PA) continues, adding that a massive campaign to delegitimize Israel was at hand.³ He was particularly concerned about the after-effects of the PA's attempt to apply for state recognition at the UN in September 2011. In July 2012, Tzipi Livni, the op-

position' leader at that time, suggested that "Israel is facing a difficult time right now, perhaps the most difficult in our history...This is a continuous process under which Israel is becoming isolated from the world."⁴ The most systematic argument about Israel's growing isolation was made by the Reut Institute in a report on the de-legitimization challenge to Israel in 2010.⁵ It focused on the dangerous effects of an international campaign to boycott Israeli products, disinvestment from Israeli firms, and the adoption of sanctions against the Jewish State (BDS).

Yet, the greater isolation apprehended by many is primarily impressionist and is not rooted in an impartial analysis of facts. A closer look at Israel's interactions with many powerful international states and less-powerful international organizations explains why such evaluations are wrong. This review provides a more nuanced and much less pessimistic picture. In fact, Israel's international status has improved since the highest record of its isolation in the 1970's.

Past Attempts to Isolate Israel

For decades the Arab world has refused to accept the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel and tried to eradicate it by use of force. Parallel attempts were made to deny legitimacy to Israel and isolate it in the international community.⁶ The isolation/de-legitimization component of the strategy against Israel has been adopted explicitly by the Arab states since the 1964 Arab Summit. As Israel was viewed as a Western-established bastion in the Middle East, the aim was to insert a wedge between the West and Israel in order to weaken it. The isolation strategy, based on the “soft power” concept⁷ became more pronounced as it became clearer to the Arab states that eliminating Israel by military means is not achievable in the near future. Therefore, the isolation campaign reflects to some extent Israel’s success in diverting the Arab-Israeli conflict from large-scale conventional war to the diplomatic arena. At the same time the isolation campaign has been directed to neutralize Israel’s superior military power and to maximize the constraints upon Israel’s use of force at the lower rungs of the ladder of force.

There are several obvious ways to measure isolation. The first is the number of states that have diplomatic relations with the outcast country. A second criterion is membership in international governmental organizations and agencies. A third measure of isolation is the amount of negative attention a state receives in international forums and public opinion. In accordance with these criteria the 1970’s stand as the worst decade for Israel in diplomatic terms.

The period after the 1973 military debacle, paralleled by the energy crisis which placed the power of the Arab world at its zenith, was when Israel was isolated more than ever. Israel then experienced an avalanche of severance of diplomatic relations from dozens of Afro-Asian states. These nations joined the communist states that, with the exception of Romania, had severed relations after the June 1967 War. In the 1970s the UN and its affiliated bodies were the setting for most anti-Israel resolutions. The Arab bloc of over twenty states regularly garnered the support of the Third World and the Soviet blocs to endorse rabid anti-Israeli resolutions in international organizations. During that period the Arab League even tried to expel Israel from the UN. The worst of the UN resolutions, from Israel’s point of view, was the November 1975 UN General Assembly resolution branding Zionism, the Jewish national movement, as racism. In spite of American

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heavy lobbying against it, seventy-two countries voted in favor of the resolution, thirty-five opposed it, and thirty-two abstained. This resolution demonstrated the decreasing international legitimacy of the Jewish state even more profoundly than the severance of diplomatic ties.

In December 1979 the UN again denounced Zionism as a form of racism. This time the deterioration in Israel's international status was strikingly evident. Only three countries, the US, Canada, and Australia, opposed the resolution. No western European, Latin American, Asian, or African state voted with Israel. An overwhelming 111 nations supported the resolution; only twenty-six abstained. Moreover, the 1979 resolution did not arouse the indignation of the free public as the 1975 anti-Zionist resolution had, indignation that was one of the reasons the resolution was not resubmitted earlier.

Interestingly, the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, a tremendous step in changing the Arab-Israeli dynamics, had no impact on Israel's immediate international status. It was Egypt that was ostracized in an Arab world that continued to oppose Israel's mere existence. The UN also refused to lend its tutelage to the peacekeeping force designed to supervise the implementation of the demilitarization clauses of the peace treaty. The US also had difficulties recruiting foreign contingents to the multinational force it sponsored to perform the supervision task in the Sinai. The temporary decline in American clout in the 1970s influenced the fortunes of its allies including Israel.

Israel's Current International Status

Since 1991, Israel's international status has greatly improved as many states decided to upgrade or to establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. This was partly related to the emergence of the US as a hegemonic global power. Israel enjoyed the fact that its superpower ally was the winner of the Cold War. The decision to upgrade relations with Israel on part of many states was motivated by the desire to potentially profit from Jerusalem's good links with Washington.

In addition, it was the result of the disappearance of several inhibiting factors. First, a change in the trends in the political economy of energy sources lessened the political leverage of the Arab bloc in world politics and of the oil-producing states in particular. Already by the end of the 1980s

the fears of energy crises had subsided substantially, with the oil market becoming a "buyers' market, diminishing the weight of Arab objections to the enhancement of relations with Israel. Second, the Arab-Israeli peace process, reactivated by the Americans with great fanfare in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, further marginalized the objections of Israel's regional enemies to third-party ties with Jerusalem. The October 1991 peace conference in Madrid, a formal gathering with Israel to which almost all Arab countries sent senior diplomatic delegations, served as a convenient pretext for hitherto reluctant states to develop a closer relationship with Israel.

An important factor pushing states to seek cooperation with Israel was the challenge of terrorism and/or radical Islam, mostly a post-2001 9/11 phenomenon. The Jewish state has much to offer in the area of intelligence, tactical, and doctrinal counter-terrorism. Because of the growing Islamist threat the number of states seeking security relations with the Jewish state was on the rise. There are many countries that fall in this category and they are hardly deterred by the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict from useful interactions with Israel.

Israel has also emerged as a great success story in the post-Cold War era, augmenting the attraction of pursuing good relations with her. This is due to its beneficial economic policies and its effective adaptation to a globalized economy. Moreover, its high-tech sector turned Israel into a global actor.⁸ Beyond its well established reputation for producing first-rate military equipment, Israel has also excelled in agriculture, medicine, communications, and a variety of other fields. All of these accomplishments have created international admiration and keen interest in bilateral exchanges.

Diplomatic Relations with Numerous States

Indeed, Israel has benefited from the international systemic changes and the peace process in the diplomatic arena to improve relations with countries once reluctant to have fully-fledged relations with her. Measuring the number of states that have diplomatic relations with Israel clearly indicates an improvement Israel's international status. For example, all states within the Soviet orbit, in former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, as well as most African and Asian states opted for diplomatic relations. They have maintained them ever since.

Significantly, major international players such as Russia, India, and China, as well as pivotal regional states, such as Turkey and Nigeria, also capitalized on the changes in the oil market and the better Middle Eastern atmosphere to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 without facing too much Arab furor. Similarly, other Asian states, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, renewed their diplomatic ties with Jerusalem in that period. The upgrading of relations with Israel was therefore part of a larger post-Cold War international phenomenon, characterized by the desire to normalize relations with a growingly important international actor, intended to tap Israeli advanced technologies and its influence in Washington.

There exists a high level of friendship for Israel and the Jewish people with the two most populous and dynamic states on the world scene: India and China, rising powers in every sense of the word. Both are old civilizations that have not been by burdened by anti-Semitic baggage like Europe. They treat the Jewish State with reverence as they see in it a similar old civilization that reached remarkable achievements. Israel was successful in forging a strategic partnership with India.⁹ Most Asian countries, even if they vote against Israel in international forums have a similar attitude.

Similarly, countries on the Pacific Rim, where the international action is moving towards, are usually pro-Israeli. South Korea and Australia are prime examples. Sub-Saharan African countries also contain very pro-Israeli circles for a variety of reasons.

Significantly, relations with the Muslim world have improved. Israel has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. Israel has oscillating informal dealings with several Arab states in the Gulf and in the Maghreb. Most of the Arab world, however, still adheres to the 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative. While this peace plan is not reasonable from an Israeli perspective (it is a “take-it-or-leave-it” proposal), the Arabs are talking peace, not war, and imply a de facto recognition of Israel, a historic change in their positions. The Arab economic boycott has largely evaporated. It is the Iranian nuclear threat that puts the differences with Israel on the Palestinian issue on the back burner.

Israel has also established cordial and fruitful relations with Muslim states that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Empire in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Israeli presence is well felt in states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Muslim identity of their populations and elites does not hinder relations with Jerusalem in areas

important to their national interests. Their sensitivity to the imagined or real misfortunes of the Palestinians is very low.

The rise of Islamists in the Muslim world is problematic for Israel, as they usually view the Jewish state as a religious aberration. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran turned it into an arch enemy of Israel. Turkey's fall under the spell of the Islamist AKP has generated an anti-Israeli change as well. The growing Hamas influence in Palestinian politics is not enhancing the slim chances of reaching a historical compromise between the Zionists and Palestinian national movement. Indeed, the greater political clout by Islamists in the Arab world as a result of the "Arab Spring," particularly in Egypt, jeopardizes the historic regional peace process, which constituted an acceptance, albeit reluctant one, of Israel as a *fait accompli* in the region. The "cold peace" with Egypt might become even cooler, but the initial behavior of the Islamists in Egypt has revealed some caution on their part. The need for economic support from the US may have a moderating effect, although religious zeal may trump rational considerations.

Similarly, ties with the most important country of the world, the US, have greatly improved since 1973, and the increasingly institutionalized strategic relationship is still very strong, despite the misguided Mid-Eastern policies of the Barack H. Obama administration. It is noteworthy that the level of the American public support for Israel has remained remarkably stable for the past four decades, at around 65%. This also translates, of course, into congressional support. Israel is still popular in the US primarily because of how it is perceived and not because of the Jewish lobby. We have recently seen President Obama bow to this popular sentiment and adopt a friendlier posture toward the Binyamin Netanyahu government.

"Old" Europe is indeed a different planet on this matter. Its naïve strategic culture, where there is no threat perception and the use of force is seen as anachronistic, makes Israel a difficult case to swallow. Israel, an American ally, is also disliked due to widespread anti-American feelings in West European elites. This is reinforced by latent traditional anti-Semitism that singles out the Jews as responsible for the problems of the world.¹⁰ Belgium, Ireland, Norway, and Sweden, in particular display anti-Israeli positions bordering on anti-Semitism. Fortunately none are core European states. Some European universities have become unpleasant places for Israelis and a large portion of the European intelligentsia is intuitively anti-Israeli and even denies Israel's right to exist. It is also true that much of the elite European media is hysterically biased against Israel.¹¹

At the same time France, Germany, and Italy, the power centers of the European Union, have been ruled in recent years by leaders (Sarkozy, Merkel and Berlusconi, respectively) that have a soft spot for Israel. The bilateral relations of these states with Israel are flourishing. The EU decided to upgrade its relationship with Israel in September 2008. Influential pockets of strong pro-Israeli sentiment are still present in all western European states. Some even view Israel's struggle as a vanguard of their own beleaguered Western civilization, threatened by moral relativism and Islamic fanaticism.¹² The growing fears of Muslim immigration in the Old Continent provide an important corrective on the prism toward Israel.

Another factor working in Israel's favor is the expansion of the European Union. "New" Europe, the eastern European states, is very different from the western part of Europe. Its strategic culture is still dominated by a historic threat perception of Russia and as result is more understanding of the dilemmas associated with the necessary use of force by Israel. The Czech Republic stands out as one of Israel's best European friends.

Generally, most states are not ready to have their relations with Jerusalem hostage to the vicissitudes of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. We can also detect the beginning of weariness with the Arab-Israeli conflict and an attitude of embedded in "a plague on both your houses." Some even begin to realize that the Palestinians have a stake in not ending the conflict and propagating the victim image to continue to get financial support from gullible Western donors.

Israel and International Organizations

Most international forums remain rabidly anti-Israeli and Israel continues to be singled out as the culprit for a variety of "sins." As no real change took place in the anti-Israeli atmosphere in the past decades, it is difficult to conclude that Israel's position has worsened in such international organizations.

Nevertheless, Israeli diplomats feel that the UN has become less hostile and therefore it is an arena where Israel has greater leeway than before.¹³ It is worth mentioning that in December 1991 the UN rescinded the 1975 UN General Assembly resolution terming Zionism racist. Israeli diplomacy adopted an exit strategy for the 2006 Lebanese war that envisioned a UN Security Council resolution and a UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon. Although a faulty strategic choice, it reflected to some extent a new evaluation on part of Israel of the morally bankrupt UN institution.

Prior to May 2000, Israel was the only UN member state excluded from a UN regional grouping. Consequently, Israel could not sit on any UN body where membership in a regional group was required, and Israel could not be elected to leadership positions on most UN bodies. However, as a result of intense efforts, Israel became a temporary member of the Western European and Others States Group (WEOG) in May 2000. Israel's admission to WEOG marked a step towards the full integration of Israel into the UN system. Whatever it is worth, Israel has become more intensively involved in the work of UN agencies. It even promoted UN resolutions over the past few years and hosted UN sponsored conferences. Israel's international aid agency, Mashav, is supported by the UN and other international agencies.

In May 2010, Israel was also accepted into the exclusive club of the OECD, which brings together the thirty-three most developed countries in the world that are committed to democracy and the market economy. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu emphasized that beyond the considerable economic significance of Israel's acceptance the OECD, the move is diplomatically important because it shows that regardless of the political process, Israel has a "place among the nations due to its economic and technological prowess."¹⁴

Similarly, Israel has become an associate member of the prestigious European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in September 2011. Israeli Ambassador to the UN in Geneva Aharon Leshno-Yaar, who signed the agreement, said, "The agreement is testimony to Europe's recognition of Israel's scientific and technological capabilities, of the quality of its scientists, and of its contribution throughout many years to the research activities of CERN."¹⁵ Membership in CERN was an additional building block in Israel's involvement in scientific projects in Europe. Europeans simply act on their interests when cooperation with Israel is beneficial.

Nevertheless, the Palestinians and their political allies have been successful in maintaining a de-legitimizing campaign, particularly since the UN-sponsored World Conference against Racism that took place in September 2001 in Durban South Africa. The Durban conference crystallized the "Red-Green" alliance between radical leftist and Islamist groups that share tremendous hostility toward Israel. This alliance is the spearhead of de-legitimizing Israel as "an apartheid regime" through international isolation. This approach, dubbed the Durban strategy, made use of a myriad of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which generally use the rhetoric of human rights, humanitarian relief, and international law. The disproportionate emphasis

placed by the NGOs on the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and specifically their numerous condemnations of Israel, has been central in the disproportionate attention of the media to alleged Israeli misconduct.¹⁶ While certainly effective in often creating an anti-Israeli atmosphere, the Durban strategy has had only very limited success to impose official sanctions via boycott and divestment campaigns.

A growing and real problem for Israel is the phenomenon of “lawfare.” Anti-Israeli groups exploit the legal system of Western states to criminalize Israel, Israeli government officials, and senior IDF officers in these states and in international forums. Several states have been sensitized to this issue and have taken legislative actions to remediate the situation. This is particularly true of states operating military forces beyond their borders, such as the US, UK, or France that could face similar challenges.¹⁷

Isolation in the international community, the literature shows, is more often than not connected to the international power configuration. Obviously normative considerations have little impact on the decision-making of the authoritarian states that deplore the human rights “abuses” of Israel. The UN Commission of Human Rights is notorious in that respect. To a large extent Israel international fortunes are linked to American international status. Indeed, the growing weakness of the US, particularly since the advent of President Obama, has exposed its small ally Israel to somewhat harder times. For example, Israel was recently excluded from the Global Counterterrorism Forum in the summer of 2012. Reports suggest that the Obama administration again acquiesced to Israel’s exclusion at the behest of Turkey and Arab members of the Forum.

Nevertheless, taking into account that Israel cannot benefit from association with a big international bloc, such as the developing countries, Muslim bloc, or with regional blocs such as Latin America or Asia, Israel is doing quite well on the international scene. It is definitely not isolated more now than ever.

Why Is There an Isolation Discourse?

Obviously Israel is not a regular country in terms of its international relations. Although the Arab-Israeli conflict is gradually less central to regional and global dynamics it still carries weight that interferes with Israel’s quest for equality and recognition in the world community. This amounts to a cer-

tain measure of isolation which Israel has been successful in overcoming in its way to becoming a strong and prosperous nation. Nevertheless, the sense of normalcy and becoming a nation just like the others, which has been the Zionist dream, has been denied to the Israelis.

Moreover, Jews are historically conditioned to sense isolation and de-legitimization. Already in the Bible, the prophet Bilam called the Jewish nation “a people that dwells alone.” The Jewish prism on international relations could amplify the sense of isolation, although Israelis seem to have developed certain immunity toward UN hostility and negative media coverage.

Israeli concerns are reinforced by the Jews in the Diaspora who display political awareness and care about Israel’s image. A poll among Diaspora Jews would probably reveal acute feeling of isolation because as a minority they are more exposed to anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli attitudes. Taking into consideration the many examples of the negative media coverage of Israel, such feelings in the Diaspora are understandable. Many Jewish organizations in the Diaspora and Israel’s non-Jewish friends give priority to battle the BDS campaign. Diaspora Jews, even more than their cousins in Israel, are thirsty for a good word from their gentile neighbors.

An important voice in the isolation discourse is the Israeli left. It argues vocally that the continuation of the conflict with the Palestinians exacts a heavy price on Israel because it is becoming an isolated and less legitimate political entity. They are influenced primarily by their reference groups, the Western left and its radical offshoots. Ascribing exaggerated importance to the Palestinian issue and to Israel’s isolation, they advocate an urgent deal with the Palestinians, even at a heavy Israeli price.

Moreover, parts of the Israeli left, increasingly frustrated by the fact that the Israeli electorate prefers parties to their right, see no alternative but outside intervention to impose a solution to the conflict aimed at “saving Israel from herself.” This requires denigrating the Israeli democracy, which adds ammunition to Israel’s detractors.

Conclusion

The Jewish people have never been popular. If there is anything Jewish history teaches us it is skepticism about relations with the gentile world. The Zionist revolution and the expectations of the emergence of a new Jew and a “normal” nation generated the belief that Jews could be treated like anybody else. Yet Israel, the Jewish state, is on many occasions still singled out for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with what the Jews are doing. It is truly exasperating.

However, the obsessive anti-Israeli behavior of international organizations and opinion makers is not the only element in Israel’s interactions with the world. A closer look at Israel’s interaction with countries near and far, as well as with international institutions, belies the claim that Israel is isolated. In fact, Israel is increasingly acknowledged as a world player in view of its social, economic, technological, financial, and diplomatic achievements in the last sixty-five years. There are significant parts of the world that appreciate what Israel is doing and try to emulate Israel’s successes. Israel’s struggles against the “bad guys” touches on many responsive chords around the world.

Moreover, realpolitik considerations dictate good relations with the Jewish state in many parts of the globe. As long as Israel is an American ally and the US plays a crucial role in world politics, the effects of isolation can be cushioned. So far Israel has weathered many challenges despite attempts to isolate it; actually, its international status has improved over the years. The struggle to gain legitimacy is not over, and it may never end, as long as there are people that adhere to extremist ideologies, be it secular or religious.

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Notes

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