



Israel

Summary and Key Talking Points

Policy Proposals

1. Strengthen U.S.–Israeli strategic cooperation in intelligence sharing, missile defense, cyber defense, and counterterrorism efforts.
2. Expand the Trump Administration’s Abraham Accords to include other Arab states that are willing to normalize relations with Israel.
3. Do not open a consulate for Palestinian affairs in Jerusalem. Any consulate that is opened should be in Ramallah, where the Palestinian Authority’s headquarters is located.
4. Push for incremental steps in Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations rather than rushing to failure on a comprehensive settlement.
5. Encourage closer working relationships between Israel and Sunni Arab states.
6. Support Israel’s efforts to deter and defend against threats from Iran.

Quick Facts

1. The Trump Administration formally recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2017 and moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018.
2. Although Israel remains committed to a negotiated resolution, the Palestinian Authority officially broke off negotiations in 2014.
3. In 2016, the U.S. pledged to provide \$38 billion in military aid to Israel over a 10-year period.

Power Phrases

A Key Ally

- Israel is the Middle East’s only genuine democracy and shares important values and interests with the United States.

Regional Threats

- Israel faces significant security threats from Iran as well as from Arab states and extremist movements that refuse to accept its right to exist.

Supporting a Path Toward Peace

- The principal barriers to peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are Palestinian terrorist attacks, not Israeli settlements.
- As our greatest regional ally, Israel deserves strong U.S. support for maintaining its qualitative military edge and right to self-defense against hostile states and terrorist groups.

The Issue

Israel, the only genuine democracy in the Middle East, shares important values and interests with the United States. It faces significant security threats from Iran as well as from Arab states and extremist movements that refuse to accept its right to exist. Iran's ballistic missiles can already reach Israel. Tehran also has provided increasingly sophisticated arms to proxy forces such as Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as such allies as Hamas and other Palestinian radical movements, for use against Israel. Iran has taken advantage of the civil war in Syria to entrench itself there and deploy Hezbollah and Shiite militia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to target Israel with ballistic missiles, rockets, drones, and terrorist attacks.

Although Israel reached peace treaties with Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994, and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020, Jerusalem has failed to reach a peace treaty with Palestinians despite extensive and prolonged diplomatic efforts. The 1993 Oslo peace accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) created the Palestinian Authority and gave it limited governing responsibilities in the West Bank and Gaza over a five-year period, which was to be followed by talks on the permanent status issues of borders, refugees, settlements, and Jerusalem. The Oslo negotiating framework broke down primarily because of Palestinian terrorist attacks that undermined Israeli willingness to make increasingly risky concessions in exchange for Palestinian promises that often were not kept. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat failed to halt Palestinian terrorist attacks first from Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and later from other Palestinian groups including factions of his own PLO.

The principal barriers to peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are Palestinian terrorist attacks, not Israeli settlements. Many Israeli settlements are located in areas that eventually could be folded into Israel in exchange for equal amounts of Israeli territory transferred to Palestinian control in a final settlement. Yet when the Obama Administration sought in 2009 to revive the comatose peace process, which had been on American-supplied life support since the collapse of the 2000 Camp David summit, it made a freeze on building new settlements the centerpiece of its strategy.

The Obama Administration's focus on settlements guaranteed friction with the Israeli government and hardened the Palestinian negotiating position because Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas could not be seen as less opposed to settlements than the U.S. Even though the Palestinians had negotiated for many years without gaining a settlement freeze, Abbas made it a condition for resuming talks. The Palestinians then sat back and let Washington attempt to wring major concessions from Israel without feeling any need to reciprocate with concessions of their own. To make matters worse, Abbas also pushed for U.N. endorsement of unilateral Palestinian statehood rather than relying on negotiations with Israel, which would be the only genuine path to peace.

President Trump proclaimed his interest in reaching the "ultimate deal," a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. He did not endorse a "two state solution" as envisioned in the Oslo accords; instead, he indicated that he could accept any solution on which the two sides might be able to agree. His Administration muted U.S. criticism of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and cut U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority to pressure it to take a stronger stand against terrorism. Meanwhile, the Administration pursued an "outside-in" strategy, eventually brokering the 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.

President Trump established himself as perhaps the most pro-Israeli American President ever to hold office. Under his leadership, the United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, closed the office of the General Delegation of the PLO in Washington, and demonstrated much stronger support for Israeli security concerns than his predecessor had exhibited.

The Biden Administration reversed many of the Trump Administration's policies on Arab-Israeli issues. It pledged to improve relations with the Palestinian Authority and reopen the consulate in Jerusalem that was closed in 2019 after serving as the U.S. diplomatic mission to the Palestinian Authority for 25 years. Following through on this pledge—a course that Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett strongly opposes—would undermine Israel's sovereignty over its own capital and ignite a crisis in bilateral relations. It also would be a violation of the intent of the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act, which recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and stipulated that the capital should remain undivided.

Recommendations

Do not open a consulate for Palestinian affairs in Jerusalem. Establishing a consulate in Jerusalem would infringe on Israel's sovereign rights and send a dangerous signal that the Biden Administration would support a divided Jerusalem. Any consulate that is opened should be located in Ramallah, the city that hosts the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority. No other country in the world has both a consulate general and a U.S. embassy in the same city.

Strengthen U.S.–Israeli strategic cooperation. The political instability that has plagued the Middle East in recent years underscores the fact that Israel is America's most reliable, stable, and effective ally in the region. Congress should support all efforts to enhance strategic cooperation with Israel, particularly in intelligence sharing, missile defense, cyber defense, and counter terrorism efforts.

Push for incremental steps in Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations instead of rushing to failure on a comprehensive settlement. A final settlement cannot be brokered as long as the Palestinian Authority is unwilling and unable to make the deep compromises that a realistic peace requires. Even if it was willing and able, Hamas and other Iran-backed Palestinian terrorist groups could destroy any agreement with another round of rocket terrorism. Incremental progress on security arrangements, confidence-building measures, and efforts to improve the welfare of Palestinians in the West Bank would help to reinforce support for the Palestinian Authority at the expense of Hamas, which has transformed Gaza into a base for terrorism. Washington also should insist that the Palestinian Authority end its incitement of terrorist attacks and halt the annual subsidies of more than \$330 million that it pays to jailed terrorists and the families of “martyrs” killed in confrontations with Israelis. A government that incentivizes terrorism is not an acceptable partner for peace negotiations.

Penalize Palestinian terrorism and encourage moderation. Congress should support efforts to hold Hamas accountable for its terrorist atrocities, violations of human rights, and acceptance of illegal Iranian arms shipments. The United States should veto any Palestinian efforts to attain unilateral statehood through the United Nations and should withdraw U.S. financial support for any U.N. agency that facilitates such efforts. It also should work to encourage the development of a practical working relationship between Israel and Sunni Arab states that face threats from Iran.

Expand the Abraham Accords to include other Arab States. The Biden Administration should work to expand the 2020 Abraham peace accords that normalized Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan to include other Arab states. Saudi Arabia and Oman are prime candidates. Those Arab states could also help to weaken and isolate Hamas, subsidize Palestinian economic development, and encourage the emergence of a moderate Palestinian leadership that is willing and able to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel.

Support Israel’s efforts to deter and defend against Iranian threats, particularly from inside Syria and Lebanon. Israel has avoided intervening in Syria’s complex, multisided civil war, but it has been drawn into a deepening confrontation with Iran and its Hezbollah surrogates, which have exploited the Syrian war to open a new front with Israel and boost the flow of sophisticated weaponry to expand Hezbollah’s military threat to Israel. Israel has launched more than two thousand air strikes to destroy Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles and other arms inside Syria before they could be transferred to the Lebanon-based terrorist group.

Hezbollah has committed about one-third of its almost 30,000 fighters as part of an Iranian-controlled Shia foreign legion deployed in Syria to prop up the Assad regime. The terrorist group is thought to have amassed an arsenal of about 150,000 rockets, which it has dispersed amid civilian buildings and underground bunkers covertly built in Lebanon. Iran has provided the bulk of these weapons, including increasingly accurate longer-range missiles capable of targeting most of Israel. Perhaps motivated by steady losses of arms and equipment due to Israeli air strikes, Iran is building weapons factories in Lebanon to assemble advanced missiles, anti-tank weapons, and drones. Israel is likely to target these facilities in future rounds of fighting with Iran and Hezbollah.

Washington should supply Israel with advanced “bunker-buster” precision guided munitions to enable Israel to destroy fortified underground military facilities established by Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanon and Syria. Such munitions also could enhance Israel’s military options for destroying Iran’s nuclear infrastructure if diplomacy fails to halt Iran’s accelerating nuclear program. The U.S. also should warn Russia and Iran that the United States will respond forcefully to future threats in Syria, particularly the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. (See the section on the Middle East.) Washington should strongly support Israeli military efforts to blunt threats emanating from Syria and Lebanon. If Moscow is not willing or able to restrain Iran in Syria, it must share the responsibility—and risk the consequences of possible collateral damage to the Assad regime—for Iran’s destabilizing actions in Syria.

Help to strengthen Israeli missile defense capabilities. Israel faces a growing threat from ballistic missiles launched from Iran, Syria, or Lebanon and shorter-range rockets and drones launched by Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or Iraqi Shia militias. During the 11-day war that broke out in May 2021, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched about 4,400 rockets and missiles against Israel, killing 12 Israelis. Israel responded with hundreds of air strikes that killed over 240 Palestinians, at least 200 of whom were militants according to Israel. The death toll on both sides could have been much higher, but Israel’s Iron Dome air defense system destroyed 90 percent of Palestinian rockets that would have fallen on populated areas and reduced pressure on Israel to invade Gaza to stop the rocket terrorism.

Washington should strengthen its support for Israeli missile defense, particularly the rapid replacement of the Tamir interceptors expended by the Iron Dome defense system. The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year (FY) 2022 includes \$500 million for Israeli missile defense and \$3.3 billion for other security assistance. In future years, more of the \$38 billion in military aid that the U.S. promised Israel over 10 years in a 2016 agreement should be allocated to missile defense, and Washington should accelerate the delivery of missile defense equipment.

Facts + Figures

FACT: Israel faces significant threats and has fought multiple wars with hostile neighbors including the:

- 1948 Arab–Israel war,
- 1956 Suez War,

- 1967 Arab–Israel war,
- 1973 Arab–Israel war,
- 1978 South Lebanon conflict to push Palestinian terrorists back from Israel’s border,
- 1982 Lebanon war to eject Palestinian terrorists from Lebanon,
- 2006 conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon,
- 2008–2009 conflict with Hamas,
- 2012 conflict with Hamas and other Islamist terrorist groups,
- 2014 conflict with Hamas and other Islamist terrorist groups, and
- 2021 conflict with Hamas and other Islamist terrorist groups.

FACT: Although Israel remains committed to a negotiated resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Palestinians have not negotiated in good faith.

- PLO leader Yasser Arafat wanted a peace process to consolidate his control over the Palestinians, but he did not seek a genuine peace.
- Arafat never fulfilled his Oslo commitment to end terrorism. He turned a blind eye to Hamas’s terrorist attacks, released Hamas terrorists from jail, and ordered an overt return to terrorism in the second intifada in 2000.
- Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 and then saw it transformed into a base for terrorism after Hamas seized power in a 2007 coup.
- Hamas rejects not only peace negotiations with Israel, but also Israel’s very right to exist.
- The Palestinian Authority, which broke off negotiations with Israel in 2014, has pushed for unilateral statehood by lobbying the U.N. in violation of its commitments under the 1993 Oslo Accords.

FACT: The United States has provided crucial military aid to Israel.

- In 2016, the U.S. pledged to provide \$38 billion in military aid over 10 years (\$33 billion to foreign military financing and \$5 billion for missile defense).
- This agreement replaced a previous \$30 billion 10-year agreement that ran through FY 2018.

FACT: The Trump Administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2017 and moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018.

- The long-delayed symbolic move addressed a historic injustice: Israel is the only country in the world that is not allowed to choose its own capital.
- Trump also exercised America’s sovereign right to recognize the capital of a close ally and choose the location of its own embassy.
- The refusal of many nations to acknowledge Jerusalem as Israel’s capital has become an integral part of the international campaign to delegitimize Israel.

- The commitment to move the embassy was already a long-standing U.S. policy. Congress voted by a bipartisan majority to pass the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, which called for moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by 1999 but allowed Presidents to waive the move on national security grounds.
- Every President since then has signed the waiver for fear of provoking a backlash that would threaten U.S. interests and reduce the prospects for a final settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

FACT: Despite the claims of leftist critics, Israel is not an apartheid state. Arab Israelis enjoy full citizens’ rights.

- Arab Israelis are able to vote, live, and work among their Jewish neighbors.
- The current Israeli government includes an Arab political party in the governing coalition.
- Israel imposes restrictions on Palestinians not because of their race, but because of security threats posed by suicide bombers and other terrorist threats.
- Unlike blacks in South Africa, Palestinians have repeatedly been offered an independent state of their own in negotiations, but so far, they have rejected Israel’s offers as inadequate.
- Israel’s willingness to negotiate a peace treaty and its acceptance of interim agreements that enabled Palestinian self-government refute charges that Israel seeks to maintain domination of the Palestinians.

Additional Resources

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