



ARGAMAN



"My Heart is in the West, and I am in the Middle East": New Diplomatic Priorities for Israel

Raphael BenLevi

The Paradigm Project: A New Strategic Agenda for Israel

Editor and Translator: Dr. Raphael BenLevi

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Ronen Shoval

Assistant Editor: David S. Allerhand

Layout and Design: Moti Alexandrovich

Cover Design: Yael Gluzberg

Publisher: Amiad Cohen

Original Hebrew version published in September 2025

Published in Jerusalem

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Herut – The Center for Israeli Liberty, 5 Aholiav St., Jerusalem 9446778

Printed 2026

English Edition © Herut – The Center for Israeli Liberty Publishers

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Printed in Israel



Chapter 13

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Raphael BenLevi¹

Executive Summary

Israel’s foreign policy has traditionally focused on the West, primarily the United States, while neglecting the potential of the Middle East and Africa regions. This trend, shaped by hostile relations with the Arab world and a sense of cultural affinity with the West, nevertheless leads to missed economic, diplomatic, and security opportunities.

The Abraham Accords demonstrated the region’s potential for openness, yet the “villa in the jungle” mindset still dictates priorities in practice. The current approach reflects a detachment from the regional geopolitical environment and prevents Israel from realizing its influence as a regional power, while also blinding it to emerging changes and threats. Israel must internalize its natural belonging to the Middle East and act from a position of self-confidence and assertiveness, with an integrative view of regional interests.

An integrative approach requires a deep familiarity with the relationships among Arab states themselves and an understanding of their interests. The more we grasp the dynamics of regional politics, the more we can initiate solutions, solve problems independently, and avoid constantly running to Washington for mediation. This approach means that major

1 The article was written on the basis of consultations with former senior officials in the security establishment. I credit them with many of the ideas that were developed by me into this article. Responsibility for the content is mine alone.

initiatives—such as an agreement with Saudi Arabia or the IMEC trade corridor—should proceed in a way that benefits all neighboring states. By contrast, when Israel cooperates with hostile actors such as Qatar, which is viewed negatively by other Gulf states, it becomes an object of contempt in the eyes of the Emiratis and Saudis.

To instill this shift in mindset within the diplomatic system, organizational steps are also required, including: transferring responsibility for managing relations with states that do not have diplomatic ties with Israel from the Mossad to the National Security Council; creating two new ministerial-level positions within the Foreign Ministry—a minister for Middle Eastern and Arab affairs and a minister for African affairs; and upgrading the status of ambassadors to regional countries. In addition, Israel should insist on reciprocal official visits and institutionalize international conferences of regional states in Israel—for example, an Africa conference in Israel every five years and a Middle-East states conference every two years.

It should be emphasized that Israel's ability to position itself as a diplomatic leader as described in this chapter depends on a decisive and unequivocal defeat of Hamas in Gaza and on fully bringing the Nukhba terrorists to justice. These two steps would demonstrate that Sunni Islamism is in the losing camp and that Israel is determined to stand firm against its enemies. Anything less would give tailwind to Sunni Islamism throughout the region and challenge regimes willing to cooperate with Israel.

The Cognitive Disconnect: Where Do We Live?

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, are a historic breakthrough for Israel's diplomatic integration in the region. They stemmed first and foremost from the fact that in recent decades Israel has become a regional power in security, economic, and technological terms, and that regional states have recognized that it is in their interest to strengthen diplomatic ties with Israel. The fact that none of them severed relations with Israel throughout the Iron Swords War attests to the strength of these interests.

Most of Israeli society, including the public elites responsible for managing foreign policy, lives with the consciousness that we reside in the United States or Western Europe

Despite this breakthrough, it seems that the State of Israel has not yet internalized the meaning of being a native member of the Middle East. It is often disconnected from the important political and geopolitical currents in the region, which pass "over its head." One might say that it is not only indifferent to the winds filling the regional sails, but not even aware that such winds exist. Most of Israeli society, including the public elites responsible for managing foreign policy, lives with the consciousness that we reside in the United States or Western Europe. The mental map in the collective consciousness

gives broad space to the West and very little to our own neighborhood, while Africa remains off in the periphery of the collective imagination.

There are good reasons for this state of affairs: the hostile relations of Arab states toward us throughout most of Israel's history; the sense of cultural affinity with the free and modern countries of the West; the distance from the political culture of most regional peoples living under monarchical and authoritarian regimes; and many economic considerations that reinforce the importance of ties with countries that have strong economies and standards of living far closer to Israel's than those of many regional states, some of which lag decades behind Western and Israeli averages.

However, the continued mindset of a "Western villa in the Middle Eastern jungle" no longer reflects Israel's political, economic, and security interests looking ahead to the coming decade. If we continue to ignore the neighborhood in which we live, we will miss critical opportunities to influence the region and to achieve economic growth, and we will be blind to crises and security threats that may emerge. We may even worsen these crises through a lack of understanding of the secondary effects of our actions.

To remove any doubt, the regional integrative approach presented in this article is not one in which Israel comes from a submissive, inferior position seeking acceptance in the neighborhood in exchange for strategic and

political concessions. On the contrary, the success of the Abraham Accords stems from Israel being a strong regional power that acts assertively to advance its interests—interests that a growing circle of countries recognizes as shared.

To act from the position of a regional power befitting Israel's present and future status requires a shift in mindset. First, we must recognize the geographic fact that we are in the Middle East and adjacent to the African continent. Our national interests are bound up with regional interests whether we like it or not. We are influenced by regional geopolitical, commercial, and even ideological developments by virtue of geographic proximity—and we can influence them in return.

Moreover, we must internalize that the Jewish people are indigenous to the Middle East—our language is a Middle Eastern language within a mosaic of regional languages—and we should feel at home here without apology and without relinquishing the fact that we represent a model of a free and technologically advanced state. The more we internalize and project the naturalness of our presence here outwardly and unapologetically, the greater the chance that other peoples of the region will eventually relate to us accordingly.

We must also update our perception of the Arab societies around us. The image of a society with low socio-economic status, a failed political culture, and one steeped

in hatred of Israel, applies to many of our neighbors, but not all, and not to the Arab world as a whole.

The result of the cognitive disconnect described above is missed diplomatic and economic opportunities and neglect of emerging security threats. The path to correction requires changes at the level of mindset, organizational changes in the foreign and defense establishments, and initiatives toward civil society. Only such changes in Israel's diplomatic agenda will allow it to realize its full potential as a prosperous and leading regional power. Without this internalization, Israel may pay a heavy price.

The Problem: Lack of Influence Over What is Happening Around Us, Missed Opportunities, and Blindness to Emerging Threats

The Road to Arab Capitals Should Not Have to Pass Through Washington

Currently, Israel relies to a large extent on American mediation in its relations with Arab states, instead of operating through direct and independent channels. Washington is an important hub for Middle East policy and its influence should not be underestimated, but there is another hub as well — the Arab states themselves. The tendency to run to Washington to mediate our relationships with Arab countries is mistaken and unnecessary. The better we understand

the relationships among the Arab states themselves, the more we will be able to initiate, solve problems on our own, and avoid the need for American mediation. On the contrary, the more we understand the interests of the pro-Western Arab states, the more we can assist them in Washington in ways that will earn us credit in our bilateral relations with them.

For example, Israeli policy toward Egypt is to support the el-Sisi regime because it is preferable to the alternatives. But we assume Washington will ensure the regime's stability for us, and therefore we give no real attention to scenarios of its collapse. We need to understand what Egypt needs now, identify opportunities to help it, and thereby create Egyptian commitment toward us that will assist in other contexts. When the Ukraine war broke out, a crisis emerged in Egypt's wheat supply. Had this crisis continued, it could have undermined regime stability. Israel should examine how it can help address such issues.

Since a stable wheat supply is a vital Egyptian interest, Israel can offer technological support in Egyptian agriculture, bring scientists, and provide the knowledge the Egyptians need. In addition, the continued development and expansion of the QIZ (Qualified Industrial Zones) framework with Egypt does not receive the attention it deserves. This agreement creates incentives for business cooperation between Israeli and Egyptian companies by granting

free-trade conditions — exemptions from customs duties on final products exported to the American market. However, the great potential embodied in this agreement is not being realized because it is not treated as a priority.

Another example is the “Prosperity Green” and “Prosperity Blue” projects — regional cooperation initiatives among Israel, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. Under “Prosperity Green,” Jordan will produce solar energy to be supplied to Israel, and under “Prosperity Blue,” Israel will supply desalinated water to Jordan. These projects have significant potential, yet their advancement has progressed far more slowly than required, partly because we did not prioritize them and instead relied on Washington to move things forward.

If We Recognize the Interests of our Neighbors, we will be Able to Accumulate Diplomatic Credit with Many countries, which will serve Israeli Interests

During the negotiations on the normalization agreement with Morocco, there was a debate within the Israeli system about whether to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Some voices in Israel opposed taking a stance on this internationally disputed issue, while others argued that since this recognition was important to Morocco, it would be a significant gesture and would create a commitment from Morocco to us that

would be difficult to quantify in advance.² Ultimately, Israel recognized Western Sahara as Moroccan territory in July 2023. In response, Morocco immediately invited the Israeli Prime Minister for an official visit.³ Additionally, after the outbreak of the Iron Swords War, Morocco maintained ties with Israel, and later that year even signed a deal to purchase two satellites from Israel.⁴ Had even one Arab country cut ties with Israel, it would have created political pressure on the others not to appear too “Zionist,” and we could have seen a wave of severed relations. Since none of them cut ties, the others maintained their stance—largely thanks to Israel’s gesture of recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

One unimplemented opportunity involves the semiconductor industry. Israel made an effort to join an agreement related to the semiconductor industry with the United States. Within this framework, Israel could have proposed connecting the United Arab Emirates to agreement, since it was also in their shared interest, but this was not done.

Africa also remains outside the focus of Israeli attention, even though it is a region close to us with many of our interests and strategic importance, given its growing population and abundant natural resources.

Additional countries in central Africa are interested in establishing ties with Israel, but Israel has neglected them. Many Christian communities in Africa support Israel out of religious affinity and a desire for cooperation. Africa also faces negative developments that require Israeli attention: Iran has been attempting to increase its influence on the continent, and strengthening Israel’s ties with African countries helps to curb Iranian influence. Geopolitical competition in Africa is also growing, including from China and Turkey, and Israel must establish its presence on the continent in light of this. Africa represents a huge potential market for Israeli technologies in agriculture, water, renewable energy, and health, and Israel has much to offer in these areas, as well as in security and the economy. Despite all this, Africa receives only a fraction of the attention it deserves.

Normalization with Saudi Arabia the Right Way: An Integrative Approach Without Gestures to the Palestinians

Normalization Which Benefits Everyone

Institutionalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is a historic opportunity,

2 Ariel Kahane, “The Early Promise, the Diplomatic Incident, and the Final Recognition – How Israeli Recognition of Western Sahara Came About,” *Israel Hayom*, 7.18.2023. [in Hebrew]

3 Itamar Eichner, “After Israeli Recognition of Western Sahara: King of Morocco Invited Netanyahu for a Visit,” *YNET*, 7.19.2023. [in Hebrew]

4 Yuval Azulai, “From Diplomatic Minutes: Morocco Purchases an Intelligence Satellite from the Aerospace Industry for About One Billion Dollars,” *Calcalist*, July 9, 2024.

but it must be managed carefully. To ensure an agreement benefits all neighboring parties, Israel must prevent the creation of fractures elsewhere. The agreement with Saudi Arabia should be approached from a broad perspective, taking into account its network of relations with other countries in the region, so as to strengthen rather than undermine ties with countries like Bahrain, Morocco, or Egypt, but rather to strengthen them through various elements incorporated into the agreement, so that all parties benefit. This approach will ensure the agreement's success and build diplomatic credit for Israel with other nations.

For example, the Saudis' central position in the Muslim world rest on their role as guardians of Islam's two holy sites, Mecca and Medina. This interest conflicts the Palestinian glorification of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Without Concessions to the Palestinians

A peace agreement with Israel would offer Saudi Arabia significant strategic and economic benefits. Therefore, we must not pay for relations with Saudi Arabia with concessions to the Palestinians, nor is there any need for any process involving the Palestinians. If we insist on including Palestinian issues, the Saudis will likely accept it eventually. In talks conducted

during the Biden administration, Washington inserted the issue of progress toward a Palestinian state—a matter of little concern to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman or to the Saudi public. If Saudi Arabia continues to demand it, Israel must maintain that it seeks peace without requiring Palestinian concessions. Israel must not present itself as desperate for normalization.

Prioritizing Palestinian demands weakens the Arab world. Focusing on the Palestinians diverts attention from other issues because Palestinian misinformation undermines regional stability.

Despite sympathetic rhetoric toward Ramallah and genuine sensitivity to the public crisis in Gaza, Arab states understand that empowering the Palestinians will not solve their internal problems and may even exacerbate them. Conversely, they also understand that Israel effectively advances many shared interests with them. For example, Jordan struggles with domestic pressures from Islamists emboldened by Assad's overthrow, faces a severe economic crisis, and depends on Israel for energy and water. Syria is fundamentally broken, divided along ethnic and religious lines, and its Islamist leadership is willing to act moderately to try to stabilize the government. Notably, all new opportunities for rebuilding ties from Israel's operations against Hezbollah and Iran. For the first time in decades, Lebanon has a government that is interested in reducing Hezbollah's dominance and recognizes that

Israeli actions have weakened the Shiite organization and opened an opportunity to restore national sovereignty.

Additionally, the Gulf states that signed peace agreements with Israel maintain ties despite critical diplomatic rhetoric because they know their economies remain unidimensional and reliant on energy exports, making cooperation with innovative partners such as Israel essential.

Saudi Arabia is at a decisive crossroads: approximately half of its GDP still depends on energy exports, despite the kingdom's wealth.⁵ The implementation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 faces many challenges and relies heavily on importing innovation from abroad to make Saudi Arabia relevant in an era of artificial intelligence. At the same time, the kingdom faces threats to the Crown Prince's life from domestic Islamists. Moreover, like many countries in the region, Saudi Arabia seeks to reduce Iranian influence, an objective aligned with Israel's recent military operations.

In this context, conditioning normalization on establishing a Palestinian state is unjustifiable. It will not help Arab states address their challenges; on the contrary, it could destabilize the limited stability they currently enjoy. Therefore, there is no room for Israeli concessions.

The Role of Faith-Based Dialogue

We must recognize that religious belief is central to the region's identity, and therefore, we should not shy away from faith-based dialogue with the Saudis. For example, the Saudis' central position in the Muslim world rests on their role as guardians of Islam's two holy sites, Mecca and Medina. This interest conflicts the Palestinian glorification of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. One might ask: What would Muhammad have thought of the Palestinians, and what would he have made of Palestinian governance, given its record of corruption? There are pathways within Islamic tradition through which the Saudis could lead change and legitimize Israeli sovereignty according to Islamic jurisprudence. Israel should emphasize its historic and religious connections to the land.

Unlike agreements with Egypt and Jordan, a warm peace with Saudi Arabia could develop over time, as a growing middle class opens to the world. However, widespread ignorance about Israel and prevailing negative opinions resulting from decades of anti-Israel education pose significant obstacles. Changing public opinion will require time, and Israel must encourage educational reforms in Saudi Arabia to present balanced Israeli-Saudi relations. The hope lies in the tendency of populations in monarchies to align with the guidance of their rulers.

5 Luke Aplin, "Saudi Arabia Hits Milestone in Shift Away from Oil Economy", *Global Finance*, 4.2.2024.

Similarly, when advancing the India-Middle East-Europe (IMEC) trade corridor initiative, it must be done with integrative regional thinking. The corridor's success will benefit the Gulf states, Jordan, and Israel, but could negatively impact the Egyptian economy by competing with transit through the Suez Canal. This reality must be addressed by developing a model that ensures Egypt benefits from the corridor or is compensated for any negative impact.

Cutting off the Hamas-Supporting Camp as a Shared Regional Interest

One of the central challenges in the region is how to relate to Qatar. The media network it operates, Al Jazeera, generates and sustains a large share of the region's problems, especially Palestinian misinformation. We must recognize that Qatar is an enemy state of Israel and a supporter of terrorism, and begin treating it accordingly. Moreover, Qatar is already considered a negative actor by other Gulf states, as it finances terrorism, corrupts academic institutions in Europe and the United States, and serves as a base for harmful Muslim Brotherhood propaganda. Thus, when Israel cooperated with Qatar on the Gaza issue, it drew contempt from the Emiratis and Saudis, who did not understand how we are willing to do this. We should halt all negotiations with Qatar, stop engaging with its government, declare it an enemy state, and eliminate the remaining Hamas elements on its territory. As part

of an agreement with Saudi Arabia, Israel could propose relocating the American base from Qatar to Saudi Arabia — a move that would strengthen regional ties and weaken Qatar's influence.

Turkey is more a rival than a friend, but there is still room for further deterioration. A cautious balance should be maintained due to shared energy and geopolitical interests. Erdoğan is on the wrong side regionally, but we do not want to intensify the rivalry with Turkey, especially given the potential hostility in the Mediterranean arena. For example, the oil Israel purchases from Azerbaijan passes through Turkey, and Turkey does not halt this flow in order to avoid harming Azerbaijan and its own reputation as a reliable country that honors major trade agreements.

In response to Turkey's hostile rhetoric toward Israel during the war, Israel rightly adopted a cautious diplomatic approach — making clear that aggression on Turkey's part would be a mistake, while avoiding escalation and keeping communication channels open in an effort to prevent further deterioration in relations. It should be understood that there has been deep hostility between Egypt and Turkey due to Turkish support for the Morsi government and Islamist ideologies in general, and this should be leveraged in our work with Egypt.

Algeria is also an important regional player due to its gas wealth and its influence over Europe. However, its hostile positions

toward Israel pose a diplomatic challenge. Algeria is hostile to Israel, supports Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, but is also hostile to Morocco — which creates a shared interest between Jerusalem and Rabat.

Mossad is not designed to serve as a political-diplomatic body but rather as an intelligence organization focused on human intelligence collection and covert missions to thwart and eliminate security threats to Israel from its enemies

Organizational Changes Required

The Mossad is not a Diplomatic Apparatus but an Intelligence and Covert Operations Agency

Currently, the head of the Mossad manages most of Israel's foreign relations in the Middle East and Africa. This is an abnormal situation, since the Mossad is not designed to serve as a political-diplomatic body but rather as an intelligence organization focused on human intelligence collection and covert missions to thwart and eliminate security threats to Israel from its enemies, viewing the world through a narrow operational prism suited to those purposes. Therefore, managing relations with countries that do not have diplomatic ties with Israel should be the responsibility of the National Security Council, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, while the Mossad should focus on countering hostile actors. Implementing this

change is critical ahead of expanding the Abraham Accords to additional countries such as Indonesia, Oman, and others.

Appointment of Ministers for Middle Eastern and African Affairs in the Foreign Ministry

The knowledge required about the network of relationships among regional countries and their various interests exists within the Israeli intelligence community. There is expertise within the system and integration specialists, but there is no entity at the political level that is willing and available to utilize this information, convene the experts, ask the right questions, and request the mapping of information for practical use. To remedy this, it is proposed to appoint two ministers within the Foreign Ministry – a Minister for Middle Eastern and Arab Affairs and a Minister for African Affairs. These ministers would have the organizational interest and political authority to identify opportunities and advance them at the national level. Appointing a senior official with the authority and responsibility to make things happen will lead to a transformation of the knowledge system, with people organizing around them. There is no need for thousands of staff positions like in a large government ministry—fewer than one hundred officials would suffice.

Upgrading the Status of Ambassadors to Regional Countries

The lack of awareness regarding the importance of diplomatic ties in the

region is also reflected in the appointment of ambassadors to these arenas, who are often individuals with bureaucratic backgrounds. Everyone knows the identity of the ambassador to Washington or the UN, for example, but not to the United Arab Emirates or Morocco. A reflection of a shift in perception and recognition of the importance of relations with these countries would be the appointment of ambassadors with a higher status. There is no need necessarily for a senior political level, but what is required are individuals with public standing who possess vision and initiative.

Visits, International Conferences in Israel, and Civil Society

Another expression of this new mindset, which carries both symbolic and practical importance, is hosting senior officials in Israel. An Israel that sees itself as a natural part of the neighborhood should invite high-ranking officials from regional countries for official visits. It should insist that these visits be regular and reciprocal. Such visits, both to Israel and by Israelis to countries in the region, will require regional leaders to acknowledge Israel as part of the neighborhood and to reinforce this message to their populations.

Beyond leadership visits, Israel should initiate international conferences of regional countries in Israel. For example, an Africa conference in Israel every five years, and a Middle East countries conference every two years. The Negev Forum initiative is

an example of this type of thinking, but it should be expanded, and the invitation of the Palestinian Authority should be avoided, as it is not a state and is an adversarial entity that would only sour the atmosphere and undermine the conference's positive potential. Efforts should be made to anchor the existence of such a conference in a future agreement with Saudi Arabia. Hosting an Arab League conference in Israel might also be considered.

At the public level, programs should be encouraged that foster interaction between populations in ways that benefit both sides. For example, student exchange programs in Abu Dhabi. Learning Arabic is important, but it should happen naturally from the bottom up, through incentive and enrichment programs, rather than as a mandated requirement by the Ministry of Education, so that Arabic learning develops as organically as possible. Opening relations will also allow for the development of the business and tourism sectors.

Deepening security integration through CENTCOM

The transfer of the American command responsible for military cooperation with Israel from European Command (EUCOM) to the command in charge of the Middle East (CENTCOM) is a huge diplomatic achievement, whose significance is not fully understood by the public. It reflects the correct perspective of viewing Israel as an integral part of the region—one that should be embraced and deepened.

Summary

Israel stands before a historic opportunity to establish its position as an influential and thriving regional power, but achieving this requires a shift in its foreign policy priorities. Israel's status as a technological, economic, and security power enables it to lead diplomatic processes, strengthen ties with regional countries, and influence the surrounding geopolitical landscape. However, continued reliance solely on Western mediation channels and neglect of direct relations with Arab countries and Africa misses the potential to create strategic partnerships, economic strengthening, and the containment of security threats.

This repositioning, however, depends on a decisive achievement against Hamas in Gaza. Halting the fighting before achieving all war objectives and failing to bring the Nukhba operatives to justice would constitute a victory for Hamas—an

outcome that would eliminate any incentive for Arab states to advance relations with Israel. They will not extend a hand to a weak partner incapable of defeating its enemies. The only way to advance in reshaping the regional landscape is to achieve a clear victory in Gaza. Afterward, Israel can resume discussions on normalization with Saudi Arabia and other countries from a position of strength.

To secure its future and status in the region, Israel must internalize its natural place in the Middle East, act boldly with a regional vision, and project self-confidence derived from understanding its power and unique position. The required change is not only at the diplomatic level but also in public consciousness and the organizational structures of the foreign and defense systems. This approach will allow Israel to realize its full potential as a stable, proactive, and leading force in the Middle East.