Israel, the Ultimate Realist

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From its founding in 1948 to its bombardments of Gaza to its new goal of regime change in Iran, Israel has consistently behaved in accordance with the realist paradigm: states are rational actors in an anarchic international system, primarily concerned with their own survival. To survive in the realist paradigm, one must strive to be the most dominant power in the region within which the country is situated. Or, in other words, to become a regional hegemon. In this view, international law, norms, or ethics are subordinate to the pursuit of national interest. Israel's behaviour — from making and breaking regional alliances to its military operations to its nuclear ambiguity — reveals not recklessness, but realism in its purest form. It is not idealism that guides Jerusalem's hand, but the hard logic of power, geography, and history. In that sense, Israel is not simply acting rationally in theatres such as Gaza and Iran — it is, in many respects, acting as the most clear-eyed practitioner of realism in the modern era.

Realism begins with an essential insight: the international system lacks a central authority. In this "self-help" environment, every state must prioritize its security, because no one else will. In realist logic, the currency of the international system is power. The ultimate value is survival. Classical realists thus emphasise the primacy of self-interest over moral principle, and regard considerations of justice as inappropriate and, even, dangerous. Surrounded historically by what Israel has perceived to be hostile neighbours, targeted by non-state actors, and subjected to frequent delegitimization campaigns, Israel has long perceived itself as a nation under siege. This perception, far from paranoia, is grounded in history: five major wars, two intifadas, rocket attacks, and a nuclear-aspiring adversary in Iran. Faced with such conditions, Israel has followed the realist script. It invests heavily in military superiority (ensuring deterrence and attempting dominance), cultivates shifting alliances (from France in the 1950s to the United States today), and acts pre-emptively when it feels existentially threatened — as in the 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor and, more recently, attacking Iran.

Realists like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz warn that moral sentiment is often a luxury in global affairs. Interests, not ideals, drive alliances. Israel's rapprochement with Arab states under the Abraham Accords is a case in point. For decades, the Arab-Israeli conflict was a cornerstone of regional politics. Yet Israel and Gulf monarchies, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, now find common cause in containing Iranian influence. These ties are not based on shared values — democracy or human rights — but shared threats. Iran's regional ambitions, coupled with U.S. retrenchment, have pushed old enemies together. Israel's relations with Russia and China reflect similar calculations. Though these regimes are authoritarian and, at times, antagonistic toward the liberal international order, Israel maintains communication and coordination with both — especially in Syria, where Russian airpower intersects with Israeli operations against Iranian proxies. This is not betrayal of democratic ideals, but adherence to strategic necessity.

Grand strategy is broadly defined as the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy and is the 'logic that helps states navigate a complex and dangerous world' (Brands 2014, 1). Grand strategy has been seen 'as the highest level of foreign policy representing a comprehensive vision of the state's critical interests and how best to promote and achieve them' (Apeldoorn 2016, 7). Does Israel have a grand strategy, then? This question continues to befuddle commentators and academics alike. In short, yes it does. And, although it has been adapted to meet the circumstances of the day, it always has been defined clearly and with candour by its leaders. Before the Jewish state was created in 1948, the Zionist grand strategy could be defined as *A State at Any Cost*. In the early years of the Jewish State, its grand strategy was summed up David Ben Gurion, the country's first prime minister,

when he said that “We have a right to Palestine as a nation, not a minority…We have a right to Palestine, not the Arabs. We should and can, from a moral point of view, use all means to break the opposition of the Arabs…When they attack us, we have the right to defend ourselves and if necessary, to spill blood as well” (Segev 2019, 804). This strategy was put into effect in the formative years of the state through a deliberate policy of territorial consolidation and demographic transformation.

In 1948, under Plan Dalet, Zionist forces carried out coordinated operations to secure areas allocated to the Jewish state—and beyond. Hundreds of Palestinian villages were depopulated, often through expulsions or fear-induced flight, laying the foundation for a Jewish-majority state and eliminating what Ben-Gurion viewed as the central obstacle to statehood: the presence of a hostile Arab population. While the official narrative emphasized self-defence and military necessity, internal documents from Israeli archives and later testimonies reveal a clear intent to reshape the demographic map in favour of the Jewish state.

Ben-Gurion understood the limits of early Zionism’s territorial ambitions, but also its long-term trajectory. In private, he often acknowledged that the 1947 UN Partition Plan was a temporary compromise. As he told the Zionist Executive in 1937, “The acceptance of partition does not commit us to renounce Transjordan… We shall accept a state in the boundaries fixed today—but the boundaries of Zionist aspirations are the concern of the Jewish people, and no external factor will be able to limit them.” The establishment of the state in 1948 thus marked not an end, but a phase in a larger vision of gradual expansion, secured through war, diplomacy, and immigration.

In this sense, the early grand strategy of the Israeli state was twofold: consolidate sovereignty over as much territory as possible and ensure a permanent Jewish demographic majority within that space. This logic would continue to guide Israel’s actions in the decades that followed—from the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 to the settlement project that accelerated in the 1970s and remains a central pillar of Israeli policy today. However, as the Israeli state consolidated itself through the subjugation of the Palestinian population and expansion into Palestinian territories, and defeated some of its external threats in the Wars of 1967 and 1973, towards the end of the twentieth century its grand strategy evolved. No longer focused solely on survival or initial state-building, it actively turned outward—toward shaping the regional environment in ways that would preclude the emergence of future threats and secure Israeli dominance for the long term.

This shift was most clearly articulated in the 1982 Yinon Plan, a strategic essay by Israeli journalist and former Foreign Ministry official Oded Yinon. The paper proposed that Israel’s security could be ensured not by peace treaties or containment, but by the fragmentation of neighbouring Arab states along ethnic and sectarian lines. A weak, fractured Arab world—divided into small, mutually hostile entities—would allow Israel to assert regional hegemony unchallenged. In Yinon’s words, “Iraq is stronger than Syria. In the short run it is Iraqi power which constitutes the greatest threat to Israel… Every kind of inter-Arab confrontation will assist us.” This blueprint suggested that internal instability in the Arab world was not a danger to be avoided, but a condition to be cultivated. The logic reappeared in a more policy-oriented form in the 1996 Clean Break paper, authored for then–Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by a team of U.S. neoconservatives, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith. The report called for abandoning the Oslo peace process and instead pursuing “a clean break” from past policies through military pre-emption, regime change in Iraq, and a redefinition of Israel’s strategic environment. It advocated the removal of hostile regimes—notably Saddam Hussein’s in Iraq—and a reassertion of Israeli deterrence through force, not negotiation. The underlying premise echoed Yinon: that Israel’s long-term security lay not in compromise or coexistence, but in redrawing the political map of the Middle East.

Together, the Yinon Plan and Clean Break crystallized a post-Oslo vision of Israeli grand strategy—one that viewed the disintegration of cohesive Arab states and the marginalization of the Palestinian issue as not just beneficial side effects, but active objectives. Within this strategic framework, occupation, settlement expansion, and military interventions are not isolated policies, but components of a coherent vision: a Greater Israel, secure not just through borders and arms, but through the deliberate weakening of any regional rival capable of challenging its dominance. This strategic orientation—focused on military dominance, regional fragmentation, and the prevention of a viable Palestinian state—has continued to shape Israeli policy into the 21st century. The Second Intifada (2000–2005) and the collapse of the Oslo process further entrenched the belief among Israeli political elites that negotiation with the

Palestinians was futile or even dangerous. Instead, unilateral action became the preferred method of control and containment. In 2005, Israel's unilateral "disengagement" from Gaza, often portrayed as a step toward peace, was in fact a tactical redeployment. As then–Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's senior advisor Dov Weisglass put it: "The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process. And when you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian State."

Following Hamas' electoral victory in 2006 and subsequent control of Gaza, Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade that effectively turned the enclave into what former British prime minister David Cameron called a "prison camp." The strategy has since involved repeated military campaigns (as in 2008–09, 2012, 2014, and 2021) designed to degrade Hamas' capabilities while maintaining control over Gaza without directly reoccupying it. Each round of violence also functioned to demonstrate Israeli deterrence and to signal to regional actors the consequences of resistance.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the settlement enterprise—once seen as a fringe movement—became a core state project. Backed by legal frameworks, infrastructure, and military protection, settlements expanded to fragment the territorial contiguity necessary for a viable Palestinian state. By 2020, key Israeli leaders—including Prime Minister Netanyahu—openly discussed annexation of large parts of the West Bank. Although formal annexation was paused in exchange for normalization deals, the de facto annexation has continued apace, fulfilling one of the central aims of the early grand strategy: irreversible control over land, with minimal Palestinian sovereignty. This dynamic culminated in the Abraham Accords in 2020 which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan without any resolution to the Palestinian issue. The Accords reflected a decades-old strategic goal outlined in Clean Break: to bypass the Palestinians entirely and realign the region around mutual interests in security, trade, and opposition to Iran. The vision of a "New Middle East" had returned—not one built on peace with Palestinians, but on pragmatic alliances that further marginalized them but centralized Israeli geostrategic concerns.

The events of October 7, 2023, and Israel's massive military response in Gaza, mark yet another turning point. Far-right ministers like Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich have called not only for full reoccupation of Gaza but for the expulsion of its population and permanent Israeli control—rhetoric that echoes the original settler-colonial logic of Ben-Gurion and the maximalist vision of the Yinon Plan. In their words, security can no longer be achieved with "surgical operations" or coexistence, but only with total demographic and territorial victory. Even as international pressure mounts, the Israeli leadership has returned to its foundational logic: overwhelming force, permanent occupation, and the management—not resolution—of the Palestinian question. Whether through settlement, siege, fragmentation of Palestinian governance, or diplomatic bypassing, Israel's evolving grand strategy continues to prioritize Jewish sovereignty, demographic control, and regional dominance—just as it has since the state's founding.

While Israel's tactics have adapted to shifting regional dynamics and global pressures, its grand strategy has remained grounded in a hard-nosed realism: the pursuit of enduring security through territorial control, demographic engineering, and regional fragmentation. From the beginning, Israeli leaders have paid close attention to how powerful the nation was in relation to its internal and external enemies and competitors. Whether through war, diplomacy, or settlement, the core objective has always been to secure a Jewish state's dominance in a hostile environment—by shaping, rather than submitting to, the geopolitical realities around it.

To understand Israel's actions is not to endorse them uncritically. Rather, it is to recognize that Israel behaves as any realist would expect a small, embattled state to behave. It scans for threats, maximizes its power, forges alliances when beneficial, and acts unilaterally when necessary. It does not place its trust in international institutions. Nor does it assume that intentions matter more than capabilities. From this vantage point, Israel's current operations in Iran are part of a broader concerted effort to further neutralise external and internal threats that hinder its attempt to further entrench itself as the Middle East's regional hegemon. Writing for *Foreign Policy* on June 18th, 2025, Michael Hirsch wrote about how Israel had established military dominance over its Arab neighbours and is now "asserting the same degree of superiority over Iran, its one remaining regional threat" (Hirch 2025). Although elements in the Israeli political elite wished for, and were granted, the downfall of Arab leaders such as Saddam Hussein, Muammar

Gaddafi, and Bashar Al-Assad, it is unclear whether they will be granted the wish of removing the Ayatollah Iranian regime; which, despite arguments to the contrary, cannot be achieved without a ground invasion at the least. A U.S. ground invasion benefits Israel in two main realist ways.

Firstly, it would accelerate the dissolution of Iran as a dominant power in the region. By dismantling the Islamic Republic's military infrastructure, crippling its strategic depth through regime change or state fragmentation, and destabilizing its influence networks across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, Israel would eliminate its most capable adversary in the region. This would fundamentally reshape the balance of power in the Middle East, leaving Israel unrivalled not just by the weakened Arab states but also by what was once its most ideologically and militarily formidable rival. Secondly, such a campaign would further undermine American influence and military presence in the region, paradoxically to Israel's advantage. The political and strategic cost of another American ground war in the Middle East – after the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan – would likely erode American public and political appetite for sustained involvement in regional affairs.

As Washington turns inward or redirects its strategic focus to other areas such as the Indo-Pacific, Israel would be left with greater autonomy to act as the principal security arbiter in the Middle East, filling the vacuum left by a retreating superpower. In this way, Israeli strategic planners can see both the collapse of Iran and the waning of American military centrality as dual pathways to regional hegemony; the goal of any clear-eyed realist state. Although nothing can be off the cards, if the regime in Iran were to be removed, Israel would undoubtedly be the dominant power in the Middle East. What this would mean for history is a much larger question.

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