

# AFTER THREE ELECTIONS: THE NEW CABINET AND PROSPECTS FOR ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY

ANALYSIS

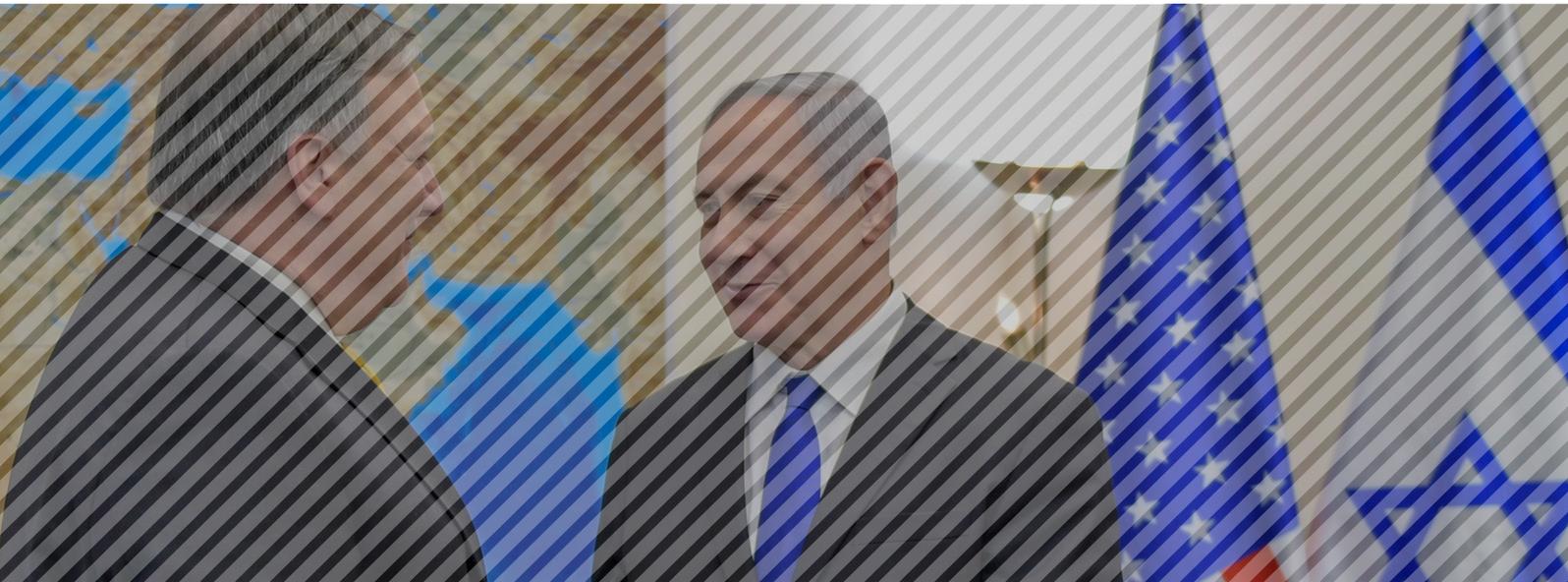


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AL SHARQ  
STRATEGIC  
RESEARCH



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# AFTER THREE ELECTIONS: THE NEW CABINET AND PROSPECTS FOR ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY

**Abstract:** As the new Israeli cabinet is finally sworn in and the debate on an annexation plan for the occupied territories in the West Bank is underway, the question of what foreign policy agenda Israel will follow is crucial. This paper aims to evaluate how Israel's relations with both global and regional actors will take shape, particularly with regard to the annexation plan. It is argued that despite the impression of change in Israel's relations with its global and regional partners, these expectations can now be fizzled out because of the relatively entrenched dynamics of the region after the Arab Uprisings.

## Introduction

Following a political abeyance for more than one year with three elections, a coalition government was eventually formed in Israel. The two biggest political parties in the last three elections, the Likud led by Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue and White led by Benny Gantz, announced their coalition agreement on April 20th. Under the terms of the deal, Netanyahu will be prime minister until November 17, 2021, while Gantz will be serving as vice prime minister. In the event of Netanyahu having to leave his post earlier to go on trial for the three pending cases against him, Gantz is to take over the role. On May 17th, the cabinet was sworn in amidst doubts raised about its formation and efficiency in solving urgent political and economic problems and its future amidst the need for political stability. The cabinet with 36 seats became the largest government in Israel's history since 1948 and constituted a ragbag of political parties, including six small parties other than the main coalition partners.

The political situation in Israel after the third election was in a stalemate quite similar to the previous two elections and there was an expectation of heading to a fourth election.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the groundbreaking incident was when Gantz' nominated himself to become the new speaker of the Knesset on March 26 and began talks with Netanyahu to form a coalition, leading to a split within the Blue and White

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and causing Yesh Atid (led by Yair Lapid) and Telem (led by Moshe Yaalon) to part ways with him.<sup>2</sup> With this step, a unity government –the most plausible option<sup>3</sup> - could be formed with a coalition of 73 lawmakers (35 MKs from the Likud party, 16 from the Blue and White party (Gantz maintained the name of the party instead of his Israel Resilience Party [Hosen L'Israel]), 9 from the Shas party, 7 from the United Torah Judaism [UTJ] party, 2 from the Labor party, 2 from the Derech Eretz party, 1 from the Jewish Home party and 1 from the Gesher party).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the parties that remained outside of the coalition, the most striking development was the far-right Yamina party's exclusion under Netanyahu's demand. Although senior figures such as Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked were former partners of the coalition government, Netanyahu excluded the party on the grounds of their excessive demands in terms of ministerial seats. This development within right-wing politics in Israel overshadowed the frustration among the Joint List ranks, who recommended Gantz as a candidate for the PM position and the isolation of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, which reveals to what extent Avigdor Lieberman-led party has lost its "king-maker" position.

### **New Cabinet**

The appointments of some figures in the Israeli cabinet are quite strategic due to their influence on the state of affairs with regard to the Palestinian issue. Among them, Gabi Ashkenazi, Gantz's partner in the Blue and White party and former chief of staff in the Israeli army (IDF), is significant for the Israeli foreign policy agenda in coming years, particularly for the "management" of the Palestinian issue. Ashkenazi welcomed the "Deal of the Century" as soon as he took his post.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Rafi Peretz, chairman of the far-right Jewish Home party, was appointed to the Ministry of Jerusalem Affairs and he will expectedly exacerbate the problems of the Palestinians living in East Jerusalem.

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Also, the appointment of Tzipi Hotovely from the Likud to the Ministry of Settlement Affairs, contrary to the expectations of her being nominated for the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs,<sup>6</sup> shows just how swiftly Netanyahu wants to take care of the annexation plan. Miri Regev's appointment to the Ministry of Transportation can also be regarded as a step for advancing ties between Israel and the Gulf states. As remembered from her historical visit to the UAE, Regev was among the leading figures in bolstering ties with the Gulf States and in the management of the transportation projects that could play a key role in "compensating" the Arab states against the annexation plans of Israel in the West Bank.

Some other appointments can be seen as motivated by either altering the bad image created by the handling of the post-coronavirus process or as more of a symbolic significance. For the Health Ministry, UTJ chairman Yaakov Litzman, who was heavily criticized for his response during the coronavirus crisis and resigned from his post,<sup>7</sup> was replaced with Yuli Yoel Edelstein, former Knesset speaker and a senior figure in Likud. Labor party chairman Amir Peretz who was appointed to the Economy Ministry, has also worked with other Netanyahu-led governments previously. With his leftist political identity,

Peretz's appointment might be a step in alleviating the economic burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and its likely societal repercussions in the country. Also, Pnina Tamano-Shata from the Blue and White, was appointed as the first Ethiopia-born minister to the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption. Moreover, Omer Yankelevich from the same party, was appointed as the first female ultra-Orthodox minister to the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs.

Yet, the government has already started to face severe criticism for its huge budget amid the economic problems ensuing from the pandemic. When the titles of some portfolios are considered, such as "community development," or "higher education and water resources", they seem to have questionable tasks and possible clashes with some other ministries. Indeed, it is reported that Netanyahu's "granting" of these cabinet seats was due to the discontent among senior party members who forced him to delay the swearing-in ceremony.<sup>8</sup> As each ministry means paying for drivers, staff and office space, this large government corresponds to more than 225 million USD on a yearly basis and will likely be challenged by society amidst the unemployment crisis, especially after more than a million Israelis lost their jobs since the start of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

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However, it is undoubtedly Netanyahu who will benefit most from this national unity government agreement for several reasons. First, Gantz became a lifesaver for his political career as his trial process on corruption charges began recently.<sup>10</sup> Even though he aimed to depose Netanyahu during these three elections, two factors caused Gantz to walk back: The emergency situation with the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with the ongoing political crisis for almost a year and also led Gantz to reconsider his objectives. Moreover, breaking up an alliance in advance while reserving some of his credibility for later by sitting in the prime ministry seat, possibly seemed more plausible to Gantz than breaking up the alliance after another failure in forming a coalition and frustrating their supporters' expectations more deeply. Hence, Netanyahu can utilize his prime ministry to put leverage on the court and increase his popular legitimacy. In fact, his being charged on three separate cases and inert judicial bureaucracy in the country, gives him the time he needs: the more the trial process lengthens out, the longer he can remain as prime minister until November 2021.

Second, Netanyahu could eliminate his biggest rival in the elections by splitting his party into two and demonstrate his pragmatism at the utmost level by reaching an agreement with the center/center-left parties, though he leads the right-wing politics in the Israeli political spectrum. His elimination of both intra-party dissidents and intra-right wing rivals, also helped the Likud increase its popularity. According to a survey conducted by an Israeli radio channel, the Likud could potentially add five more seats if an election would be held now, unlike Gantz and his Blue and White parties whose popularity is decreasing.<sup>11</sup>

Third, and as the most important, Netanyahu could show that he can find alternative political allies in order to conduct pro-annexation policies without the support of far-right pro-settlement parties. With the undisputed impact of the pandemic creating an extraordinary situation driving the need of political stability, Gantz could potentially replace their political support. In other words, he seemingly does not have to appeal for Yamina's nor Yisrael Beiteinu's backing in order to push his political agenda forward and he can act solely with his party as well.

### **Annexation Strategy in Caution**

Even before the formation of the government and the second non-concluding elections on September 17 of last year, the issue of annexation for the Israel-occupied territories in the West Bank was being circulated in the political sphere. As soon as the government was formed, Netanyahu declared that he is not hiding his intention of bringing this issue into cabinet quickly.<sup>12</sup> Although according to the coalition agreement, Netanyahu can hold a vote on the issue of annexation in the cabinet or parliament any time after July 1st, he will most likely accelerate his efforts to prepare the grounds for the materialization of the plan.<sup>13</sup>

However, Netanyahu will have to deal with two problems for this agenda: the timeframe of the plan and the mapping of the area that is to be annexed. Regarding the timeframe, he needs to act quickly as the presidential elections in the United States are rapidly approaching and a change in the administration is possible. Having previously served as vice president in the Obama administration, Joe Biden's opposing stance regarding the annexation is expected.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Netanyahu will likely try to maximize his gains and strengthen his

hand in the annexation issue before a new administration begins work in Washington in the event of Biden's victory. Nonetheless, Netanyahu will also need to gain the support from both his partners in the coalition and the officials in Washington DC. It is reported that the US administration is highly unlikely to approve Israel's unilateral implementation of the plan by July 1,<sup>15</sup> and would rather prefer to see a consensus among the coalition members, meaning approval from Gantz and Ashkenazi.<sup>16</sup> However, the dispute between the two leading factions of the coalition is also reportedly widening due to Netanyahu's failure in drawing a clear outline of the plan, a schedule to follow as well as his inability to secure an understanding with Arab states.<sup>17</sup>

The area to be annexed and the scope of this annexation plan continues to remain a mystery as well. Many scenarios of the plan exist in this regard, including the annexation of the territory of settlements alone (around 4-10% of the West Bank) or the Annexation of the Jordan Valley (around 17%), and even the annexation of all of Area C (around 60% of the West Bank). In addition, there is also the option that the Trump-led plan envisages, in which the areas to be annexed

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comprises about half of Area C or about 30% of the West Bank, in exchange for Israel's transfer of the remaining half of Area C, the southern Hebron hills, and two Gaza Strip-connected areas of the Negev to the Palestinian Authority.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, as a strategy to solve this two-dimension problem, Netanyahu is expected to follow a gradual plan with a strict schedule and under coordination with the US in terms of the mapping of the area that will be annexed. In this effort, the blocs of Ma'ale Adumim, Ariel and Gush Etzion that are currently inhabited by large settler populations will be initially annexed in the summer,<sup>19</sup> but the Jordan Valley and other settlement areas could be involved later after the details and the maps are agreed upon with the Trump administration, as top Israeli officials said.<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, Gantz reportedly warned settler leaders against being over demanding from the Trump administration, and asked that they be content with what the US is willing to do in this matter.<sup>21</sup>

The appointment of Gabi Ashkenazi should be regarded as crucial and key for maintaining the coordination with the US in this regard. Evaluating the Trump-led initiative as a historical opportunity, Ashkenazi has welcomed the plan and demonstrated his willingness to carry it out, while also trying to avoid making a bold step in a rush. He started to act as foreign minister even before his inauguration and met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Jerusalem<sup>22</sup> as a signal of his willingness to execute an active foreign ministry in spite of the overwhelming image of Netanyahu in diplomacy in the last couple of years.

Ashkenazi's assertive nature in politics is nothing new. In 2012, right after his term ended as the IDF Chief of Staff, he had indicated that Israel should withdraw from the West Bank unilaterally and must set its own borders for the long view towards peace talks.<sup>23</sup> It was even reported that this hawkish in military but "dovish" in diplomacy stance that Ashkenazi has displayed impressed the then-President Shimon Peres in regards to taking over the Labor leadership as a center-left figure.<sup>24</sup> His stance regarding the Palestinian issue and support for the two-state

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solution was because of the “demography” threat posed by the Palestinians that gradually started affecting the general debate in Israel<sup>25</sup> with the perception that this could change either the “democratic” or the “ethnic” nature of the state in future. After years, however, it seems that Ashkenazi is adopting a more pragmatic approach, following a harmonizing view with Netanyahu in the Palestinian issue, particularly regarding the Trump-led “Deal of the Century”.

### **Arab Reaction to Annexation**

When it comes to how Palestinians and the Arab states will react against this development, concrete steps are expected to be taken but without the ability to deter Israel. Along with the uproar from the Palestinian community, it may also generate a gap within the cooperation framework with the Palestinian leadership and the governance of Palestinians. As a matter of fact, in a speech to Palestinian leaders in Ramallah, PA President Mahmoud Abbas declared that the PLO and the State of Palestine “are absolved, as of today, of all the agreements and understandings with the American and Israeli governments and of all the obligations based on these understandings and agreements, including the security ones.”<sup>26</sup> It should also be highlighted that contrary to what was designated in the Oslo Accords, the PA is even deprived of executing its full sovereignty over Area A (18% of the West Bank) because of

Israeli control over the area on the issues of freedom of movement, crossroads, natural resources and particularly taxes (about 80% of the PA budget).

Having said that, Hussein al-Sheikh, who is a close figure to Abbas,<sup>27</sup> has apparently contradicted this call by Abbas and said that security coordination with Israel has not been suspended, and the Palestinian security services will continue to maintain law and order as “a strategic decision.”<sup>28</sup> This situation regarding the PA’s ambiguous stance demonstrates that a clear strategy has not yet been determined.

Such ambiguity can also be witnessed in Jordan. King Abdullah II warned Israel of a “massive conflict” in the event that it goes ahead with the plan,<sup>29</sup> and Palestinian sources have said that he “will not move silently through the annexation process.” However, how exactly the Hashemite Kingdom will proceed is still unknown. Despite the Israeli annexation being a direct threat to Jordan’s national security, abrogating the peace treaty with Israel remains a low possibility for two reasons: First, the treaty is an international agreement and it cannot be ruled out by the Jordanian parliament. Second, the Kingdom is still dependent on US aid and this ties its hands against taking an active position on this issue.<sup>30</sup> Even the cancellation of the \$10 billion natural gas deal in September 2016 is a low possibility due to the reasons mentioned previously.

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Moreover, it is believed that Jordan will benefit more than Israel in this deal.<sup>31</sup> All these circumstances point to a more symbolic step such as the withdrawal of the ambassador to Israel or the downgrading of diplomatic relations, even to the extent of freezing security and intelligence coordination efforts.

For Egypt, the annexation means that the two-state solution is becoming a less realistic option and a loss of its the role as intermediary between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Therefore, Egypt is trying to dissuade Israel from materializing this plan with reports that the intelligence chiefs of the two states met recently in Cairo.<sup>32</sup> However, expecting a strong response from Egypt by confronting the US and Israel at the same time is not plausible. Security cooperation with Israel in Sinai and the US economic aid along with its mediation in the disputes regarding the construction of the Renaissance Dam are significant for Egypt and could therefore push the country to follow a limited response accordingly. <sup>33</sup> This response might include the decrease of cooperation in energy for natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean or increasing coordination with the Arab countries in taking punitive measures against the annexation decision.

Apart from Jordan and Egypt, the annexation also has the potential to trigger a strong Arab reaction, especially in the Gulf States. In an unprecedented development, the UAE's Washington envoy Yousef Al-Otaiba wrote an op-ed piece in Israel's Yediot Ahronot newspaper and called on the Israeli government to choose between either annexation or warmer ties with the Arab world.<sup>34</sup> But such a reaction does not necessarily mean that the Arab-Israel rapprochement will shrink but instead could mean the gradual improvement of ties within a flexible timeline in the annexation plan.

Yet, the worst scenario for Israel is not the reaction itself, but the lack of ability for these Arab states to control the Palestinian uproar. For example, the Palestinian Authority has rejected the UAE-sent medical aid for coronavirus measurements via Israel.<sup>35</sup> Although Israel has benefited from the shrinking of the weight of the Palestinian issue after the

Arab Spring, the increasing gap of mutual understanding between the Palestinians and the Arab states still has the potential of reversing all the achievements reached so far.

### **A Likely Reconciliation with Turkey-Qatar Axis?**

In its new foreign policy, it is expected that Israel will need to deal with the Turkey-Qatar axis. Since the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, Israel has perceived these states and their proactive support for the pro-change political groups as hostile, given its reflexive pro-status quo stance. This concern with the political atmosphere during the uprisings and the rise of Iran's influence across the region, has become an important factor leading Israel to enter a rapprochement process with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, together with the tightening ties with Egypt in security cooperation. In exchange for security cooperation and sharing the same values against the Islamists, Israel could expect to take bolder steps in the Palestinian issue with this tactical solution.

But it seems as the Saudi-UAE-Bahrain-Egypt axis is failing in overpowering Turkey and Qatar in regional conflicts. First, the axis-backed Khalifa Hafter's forces are

currently losing ground in Libya. Egypt and the UAE are reportedly planning to abandon him<sup>36</sup> after consecutive failures in capturing Tripoli and losing control of the Wattiyah air base to forces affiliated with the Government of National Accord (GNA) backed by Turkey. Second, none of these actors are at the table to determine the future of Syria now. Although Iran is somehow isolated in the peace talks, Turkey could flex its muscles both in diplomacy and military conflict as developments in Idlib have demonstrated. Moreover, the UAE's attempt to sabotage the process by pushing Bashar al-Assad to break the Idlib ceasefire have failed miserably.<sup>37</sup> Lastly, Qatar could resist the 3-year blockade by Saudi, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain and seemingly maintained its foreign policy agenda across the region.

Accordingly, all these factors could motivate Israel to enter a reconciliation process with these two states, particularly with Turkey whose relations have a deeper background. In addition, Turkey's increasing profile in the Eastern Mediterranean after signing a maritime deal with the GNA in Libya as a step that connects the two disputes together, has forced Israel to take the Turkish presence in the region into account.

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Most importantly, Israel did not take part in the statement that was signed by the foreign ministers of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and the UAE, condemning Turkey for its activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although it has a partnership with Egypt, Greece and Cyprus and even plans to build a pipeline for natural gas reserves there, Israel's move can also be seen as an indicator of losing belief in the durability of EASTMED project and instead seeking an alternative path to achieve the construction of the pipeline. Despite rumors emanating about Israel and Turkey's seeking a maritime deal like the one signed with Libya's GNA, it was officially denied by the Israelis.<sup>38</sup>

In that vein, Roey Gilad, the Chargé d'affaires of the Israeli Embassy in Turkey, wrote in a piece that the two countries "do not need to agree on everything" in order to have a good relationship and expected Turkey to take the first step.<sup>39</sup> On May 24, just three days after the publishing of this piece, a cargo plane operated by Israel's El Al air carrier landed in Istanbul, for the first time in more than a decade.<sup>40</sup> It was also reported that Turkish intelligence chief Hakan Fidan and his Israeli counterpart Yossi Cohen met at least twice within the last 10 months in Berlin and Washington DC.<sup>41</sup>

However, despite these positive remarks and good relations of trade as a traditionalized aspect of bilateral ties, the traumatic effect of the Mavi Marmara incident 10 years ago, is still alive on the Turkish side.<sup>42</sup> To make matters more complicated, the current Israeli foreign minister was then-IDF Chief of Staff and the main perpetrator of the Mavi Marmara incident, having played an active role in planning to kill one of the travellers during the raid.<sup>43</sup>

When it comes to Qatar, one can expect that the management of the economic conditions in Gaza will continue to drive the bilateral understandings.

### **Israel in between the US-China Rivalry**

Another issue that has come to shape Israeli foreign policy is the US-China rivalry. Israel currently enjoys excellent relations with China in trade and tourism. Since Israel has a strategic location as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investments in Israel have grown considerably, including investments in high-tech companies as well as the construction and operation of infrastructure projects. Bilateral trade grew by 402% in the past decade and reached about \$14 billion in 2018, which makes China Israel's third-largest trading partner after the US and the EU.<sup>44</sup>

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However, according to the US, Chinese companies involved in major transportation infrastructure projects, such as the expansion of Ashdod Port and the construction and operation of the new Haifa Port terminal, invest in “dual-use” commercial technologies that could have military or intelligence functions. Moreover, Chinese telecommunication companies Huawei, Xiaomi and ZTE, which have strong relations with the Chinese ruling elite, are also known to have security vulnerabilities.<sup>45</sup> This has even become the main discussion point during Pompeo’s visit and he has warned Israel about the Chinese Communist Party having access to Israeli infrastructure and communication systems, which puts Israeli citizens at risk.<sup>46</sup>

This is not the first time that the deepened relationship between Israel and China becomes a concern for the US. In 2000, Israel’s plans to sell the Phalcon radar system to China came to nothing after facing significant US pressure to cancel the deal, which caused Israel to pay billions of dollars in compensation. Similar pressure from the US was also seen after Israel formed an agreement with a

Chinese company for the construction and operation of the new Haifa port in 2015. Unlike 15 years ago, this time Israel did not step back and preserved the Chinese investment.

In the current situation, despite the fact that the US pressure and its staunch support in the Palestinian issue will push Israel to be careful regarding bids from Chinese firms,<sup>47</sup> Israel will still do its best to maintain good relations with China. As a reciprocal step, the suspicious death of the Chinese ambassador to Israel at his official residence in the city of Herzliya, didn’t prevent China from sustaining good bilateral relations with Israel. With a likely Biden presidency in the near future and a possible crisis with Washington, these relations may even progress further. Having said that, such progress would still be limited to the economic sphere.

### **Other Actors**

In the last couple of months, Russia has been following an active diplomacy approach in regards to the annexation issue and intensifying contacts with the Palestinians. As Lavrov reiterated Moscow’s pro-two-state solution approach

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and declared concerns over an escalation of violence in the region with the annexation plan,<sup>48</sup> it is reported that Russia is involved in efforts to act as a mediator by organizing a meeting between Netanyahu and Abbas, as well as another meeting between the US officials and the PA.<sup>49</sup> Namely, as far as it is favored by the regional actors who were not content with Israel's unilateral steps, Russia would not refrain from getting involved in this issue as it seeks an active policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily undermine the traditionally pragmatic pattern of bilateral relations. In Syria, Russia has consolidated its position in shaping the future of Syria, with Iran's influence being diminished after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. With this development, Israel seems to have achieved its foreign policy goal to repel Tehran's network in its northern borders and is expected to continue cooperating with Russia on this matter. In Libya, the two states also share a common stance by supporting Haftar. Regardless of the result of the judicial process for his trial, Netanyahu's good personal relations with Vladimir Putin, will continue to be a substantial factor in bilateral relations.

Last but not least, the future of Israel's relations with the European Union will be shaped by the state of affairs in the aftermath of an annexation decision. Several officials from the EU have declared their criticism towards the annexation plan and there has been a debate on whether Israel should be sanctioned in economic or cultural/scientific cooperation terms.<sup>50</sup> However, considering the incoherence among the EU member-states, such a reaction will not deter Israel from implementing this plan. It is clear that Brussels is seeking to increase its contacts with Israeli political figures other than Netanyahu in order to balance his unilateral steps. Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, talked with Gantz on this matter and stressed the need for better cooperation and dialogue with Israel.<sup>51</sup> This balancing policy through contacts with coalition partners may also have further implications in the event of Biden being elected in the US elections.

**Conclusion**

This paper aimed to portray the expected foreign policy of Israel with its new cabinet. It appears as though the issue of annexation in the West Bank will be the top priority of the cabinet, while the implementation of the policy is desired to be in coordination with the US. With the potential change of administration in the US and Israel's relations with China being possible setbacks, Israel might seek minor changes in its ties with the Turkish-Qatari axis in the region. However, the future of this government is doubtful given the prospective intra-member rivalries and the trial of its prime minister.

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