SOPHIA GOODFRIEND

Interview

THE NEW ISRAEL

You've been researching Israeli military-intelligence operations in the West Bank and Gaza since 2017. What brought you to this topic?

Growing up, I was exposed to duelling narratives about Israel—one from the progressive Seattle high school I attended, the other from the community around our Reform Synagogue. In 2012, my first undergrad semester at Tufts, I took classes on Israel-Palestine taught by Palestinian scholars and began to read more widely. I got involved in Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace, and wrote my undergraduate thesis on the relations between Jewish-American identity politics and Israel. I went there for research in 2017, visiting the West Bank, thinking about possible topics before starting postgraduate work at Duke in anthropology. The technological changes in the infrastructure of the occupation were already visible. The first facial-recognition cameras were going up at checkpoints. Palestinians were talking about the mass surveillance of social media through cell-phone monitoring and other mechanisms—all this as accompaniment to the ongoing housing demolitions and land seizures in Palestinian villages. This was at the height of Israel's rebranding as an innovative 'startup nation', and at the same time I was encountering young Israelis who saw their work in IDF intelligence units as a stepping stone to a career in the growing tech sector; who talked about the modes of surveillance they had pioneered in the Palestinian territories as if it were a bragging point on their CVs.

I wanted to track these two facets of occupation and military rule. On the one hand, the Israeli coders circulating through IDF intelligence

units, who saw this as essentially cleaved off from politics. And on the other hand, the effects of the intrusive technologies they worked on in the occupied West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza, on Palestinians' everyday lives. How did military-intelligence surveillance and targeting get framed as if it were just a coding boot camp, or a degree in computer science? What does this tell us about the nature of the occupation, the question of Palestine and Israel today? That was the original intention. But after October Seventh, the parameters of my research shifted and I began tracking the use of the IDF's automated military-targeting systems in Gaza.

How did the fieldwork go?

I spent summers there doing preliminary research, then returned for fieldwork from the start of 2021 through to mid-2024; so I was there for October Seventh. I interviewed Israelis who had worked in Unit 8200, the signals-intelligence unit that's portrayed as the secret of Israel's high-tech success—some of its members also spoke to Yuval Abraham in the documentary *NAZA*.[1] And I interviewed Palestinians in Jerusalem, Hebron and other places in the West Bank who had been subject to them. The civilian mass-surveillance systems in the Occupied Territories are the real source of any Israeli tech advantage. They reached their full dystopian potential after October Seventh, but the AI data-crunching programmes that were used to select targets—supposedly Hamas fighters—in Gaza, and to calculate how many non-combatants would be killed alongside them, depended on years of more banal data-gathering.

Unit 8200 began using predictive algorithms on data from Palestinians' internet activity and cell phones in the 2010s, combing audio calls, text messages and social-media posts to profile future 'lone-wolf' attackers, whom the occupying troops could arrest on suspicion. Since 1967, all Palestinian telecoms have been routed through Israel. Stipulations in the Oslo Accords further entrenched Israeli control of Palestinian information and communication infrastructure. Today, Israeli authorities have automatic access to phone calls, texts, internet traffic. These surveillance sources are supplemented by data from human informants, some of whom are blackmailed into handing over information to Israel's security services. There is visual intelligence from drones, sat-

[1] *NAZA*, directed by Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, 2026.

ellites and CCTV cameras, as well as bureaucratic surveillance such as population registers, some inherited from British colonial administrators. Practically speaking, all this has allowed 8200 to amass stunning amounts of Palestinians' data—by July 2025 the unit was storing some 200 million hours of audio calls, transcribed and translated from the Arabic on Microsoft Azure servers in Ireland. Unit commanders have set up a number of sub-units to generate programmes capable of crunching all this information. Yuval Abraham has reported on Lavender and Gospel, but there are many others—Hunter, Alchemist, Depth of Wisdom. Gospel identifies the geospatial coordinates of locations supposedly linked to militants, often their homes. Lavender produces kill lists of individuals, with scores for the probability of their belonging to militant groups.[2] Programmes like these were developed for military targeting over the last decade, and used in the May 2021 attack on Gaza. They were ready to go after October Seventh.

What did your Israeli interviewees say about their work?

Most were in favour of automated targeting—one said it was a more accurate and efficient way to defeat the terrorists. Some were worried about right-wing combat troops using the technology to bully and terrify Palestinians. For example, combat units in the West Bank can scan Palestinians' faces with an IDF smartphone and get an automatically generated security rating, on the basis of which they can be arrested. Or they can search through the telecoms records of a certain area on a tablet and arrest anyone who is talking about guns. Unit 8200 has developed large language models that can synthesize troves of data about any Palestinian, allowing soldiers to search through the most intimate details of a person's life on chatbot-style interfaces.

Some years ago, Eyal Weizman related the methods of targeted killing to the chilling casuistics of international law. After half a million or more civilians were killed in Vietnam, there was a deliberately vague 1977 addition to the Geneva Protocols stipulating that civilian deaths should not be 'excessive'. In 2003, Weizman writes, this led the US Defense Intelligence Agency to try to calculate how many civilians it could 'legally' kill when trying to assassinate Saddam Hussein and his generals in an urban environment, just as Ehud

[2] See *inter alia* Yuval Abraham, '"A Mass Assassination Factory": Inside Israel's Calculated Bombing of Gaza', *+927 Magazine*, 30 November 2023.

Barak in Israel was trying to establish the same figure for killing Palestinian leaders of the Second Intifada. Already, US officials were feeding data about a building's construction materials, the population density around it and the type of bomb to be used into specialized software, which would estimate the number of civilian casualties; munitions could be tweaked to keep the deaths just below the legal number—in this case thirty; twenty-nine deaths were not deemed 'excessive'.[3] *But of course the scope and scale of 'targeted' killing have changed dramatically since 2003.*

Yes, AI computation has taken target generation to another level—military officials have bragged that, with AI, troops can generate twice as many targets to bomb in a single day as they used to come up with in a year. But the 'humanitarian calculus' and the veneer of international law are still there. Officially, every bomb and missile fired at Gaza has a notional Hamas or Hamas-aligned target, identified by high-speed crunching of this mass of data, all at once: everything on people's phones, everything on the internet and social media, geolocation tags, all the footage from surveillance drones and cameras. As Hamas members have been running most of the welfare and administrative infrastructure in Gaza since they swept the 2007 Palestinian Authority elections, AI can find any number of people with relations to 'terrorists'. But it's not just a question of technology. It's about the specific military policies which allow that type of bombing to take place: relaxing the number of non-combatants that can be killed; night-time attacks on families' homes.

How would you describe the situation in Gaza today?

The war is still going on, a year after the ceasefire was signed. The IDF now occupies some 70 per cent of the Strip, which it has ethnically cleansed. Nearly all Gaza's two million inhabitants have been displaced and most live in makeshift tent cities or in the wreckage of their homes. Vital infrastructure, water and sewage systems have been destroyed. The hospitals are in ruins. Much of the agricultural land is in the occupied zone, so Palestinians can't access it. Israel has imposed draconian restrictions on goods entering the Strip, halting the import of anything deemed 'dual use', including construction materials, sanitation equipment, gasoline, generators and other crucial supplies that

[3] Eyal Weizman, 'Forensic Architecture: Only the Criminal Can Solve the Crime', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 164, Nov–Dec 2010.

people without homes or electricity need to make it through the winter. Airstrikes continue, killing more than 1,500 and wounding hundreds more since the first phase of the Trump-brokered 'peace plan' came into effect. On the ground, Hamas remains mostly in control of the areas beyond the Yellow Line. Their reach within Palestinian society is not going away any time soon. The IDF sponsors various gangs and militia groups to try to undermine Hamas's capacity to govern: there are reports of them killing civilians and looting homes. Israel is enabling a state of lawlessness, as part of its policy of containment and fracture.

How do Israelis perceive the situation in Gaza?

Most see the status quo as quite positive, with two thirds of the territory under Israeli military control. Among the liberal opposition, there is not much talk of what to do about the remaining territory and the two million Palestinians still living there. The Netanyahu coalition has been pushing for a permanent occupation and the 'voluntary migration' of the Palestinian population, meaning creating conditions so intolerable as to force them out. But it's not clear where they would go. Egypt has taken about 100,000 refugees since October Seventh, but it doesn't want to take millions to facilitate a project of territorial annexation.

How has the situation changed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem?

There has been an intensification of what was already underway. The mass closures, skyrocketing arrest rates and strangulation of the Palestinian economy could be compared to the period of the Second Intifada, but with all this coming on top of the regime of separation that Israel has imposed in the two decades since. Almost 30,000 Palestinians are under detention, most through indiscriminate policing. For example, there was a big increase in flying checkpoints, where Israeli soldiers stopped people at random and searched through their phones; if soldiers found any reference to October Seventh, they would be detained. The revocation of work permits has led to mass unemployment. About 175,000 Palestinians used to work within Israel's borders or in settlements; by the end of 2025, that number had fallen to 50,000, only a fraction of whom have permits. The economy has shrunk by some 32 per cent. Road closures have paralysed commerce, and the complete closure of Jerusalem and Israel to Palestinians in the West Bank has caused people to lose their incomes and separated families.

At the same time, the Israeli government has been withholding the Palestinian Authority's tax revenue. In a bid to secure funds for itself, the PA has been cracking down on illicit activity, including the smuggling of gasoline. This created a shortage over the summer; driving through the West Bank, you would see cars lined up waiting at petrol stations. On top of all this has been the well-documented rise in vigilante settler violence, driving Palestinians from their villages and farmland. In the West Bank, too, the Israeli right is calling for 'voluntary migration': settler groups have put up billboards with a slogan in Arabic, to the effect of 'Don't you want to leave?' But most can't do so; nor do they want to submit to this ethnic cleansing.

You paint a vivid picture of the IDF's surveillance capacities, but all this spyware didn't foresee October Seventh. Or did it?

There was a lot of hubris. The Israeli military had spent years telling themselves that they were this undefeatable powerhouse—with a multi-billion-dollar separation wall, sensors under the ground, drones in the air, autonomous tanks rolling along the border. They certainly had the ability to know that an attack was about to happen. And there is now plenty of reporting to suggest that warnings were ignored. One mid-level intelligence analyst allegedly produced a report saying precisely what was being planned, only to be ignored by his superiors. *Haaretz* has reported that Netanyahu was personally warned by multiple figures, including the president of UAE, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. A case can be made that it was in his interest for an attack of some kind to happen; he was facing multiple corruption charges and massive protests. Did he imagine it would be on the magnitude of October Seventh? I don't think so.

In Israel, the role of the IDF as a national institution is completely unlike that of the military in any other advanced-capitalist country; a veritable ideological state apparatus, in its own right. How does it shape Israelis' outlooks?

Ever since the founding of Israel, the IDF has been the principal mode of cementing a national identity—of creating the Sabra, the 'New Jew'. The army is visible everywhere. You see conscripts in fatigues in malls, cafés, trains, bars and bus stations, lugging guns and kit bags, as they circulate between their bases and their parents' houses. Since October Seventh, it's common to see reservists in civilian clothes with assault

rifles slung across their backs. Commercials will show soldiers unbuttoning their fatigues to reveal a branded shirt, or someone coming home from the base and reaching into the fridge for a chocolate milk. The authority of the military reaches right across the media. Pundits on prime-time TV are regularly introduced by way of their years at the helm of military-intelligence divisions devoted to Iran, Lebanon or the Gulf. Politicians are lauded for their decorated army careers. Leading newscasters often get their start at Galgalatz, the army's national radio station, or in the IDF's Spokespersons Unit. For Zionism's strategists, the military was always a tool for internal nation-building as much as territorial conquest—as writers like Uri Ben-Eliezer, Baruch Kimmerling and Haim Bresheeth-Žabner have explored. The Israeli leadership has been remarkably effective in constructing civilian institutions—schools, universities, the media, the medical system—that help to keep the military at the centre of national consciousness and public life.

Concretely, how does it shape an Israeli's life course?

The moment a Jewish child enters the education system, they learn they will become a soldier. Primary schools will invite veterans or serving officers to lead their assemblies. At sixteen, Israelis take the IDF's evaluation exams, testing their physical and mental fitness as part of the selection process to see which unit they should be assigned to, and high schools run special classes to help them prepare. Where you get placed by the military determines everything else: if you're fast-tracked into an elite unit for military service, you could be a rich and successful technology CEO; if you're evaluated as a combat soldier, then maybe you'll work in a gas station. The sorting maps onto existing socioeconomic class divisions. Upper-middle-class families really want their children to serve in an intelligence unit, which is seen as good preparation for a job in the technology sector, a college degree in computer science. Many in these sectors see combat duty as a waste of time, physically risky and laden with ethical quandaries—manning the occupation, staffing checkpoints and border posts. By the 2010s, the unit devoted to computer engineering and signals intelligence had become the largest single military unit in the IDF, with more soldiers than the Israeli navy. There are all kinds of after-school initiatives geared towards getting children from more privileged sectors of Israeli society into these vaunted units. You can sign your kid up for a pre-army programme or coding classes that will teach them the necessary skills for the placement exams, so that

that's where they'll get sorted. Military units then have special training programmes through universities—the higher-education system is intrinsically bound up with the IDF. Industry too, through IDF partnerships with technology firms and manufacturers. So the military is deeply ingrained in the culture, at all levels. Every Israeli interacts with its institutions, even if they manage to avoid direct service.

The armed forces also play a part in reproducing social stratification?

Yes. They are largely divided along ethnic, class, political and religious lines. Combat units are disproportionately made up of religious Zionists from lower-class communities, increasingly Mizrahi Jews, who live far from Israel's more moneyed urban centres—including those from settlements in the West Bank. By contrast, the security elite has traditionally come from secular-Ashkenazi Israeli society. The cleavages within the armed forces have become increasingly pronounced: where pro-settler battalion commanders are patrolling the West Bank, they are less likely to heed commands from the upper echelons telling them to prevent a settler outpost from razing the olive groves of a Palestinian community. The self-image of the elite forces—the technology units, intelligence, special forces, the Air Force—is that they are moderates who follow the rules; not doing the dirty work of maintaining the occupation, not implicated in human-rights abuses, unlike the unruly policing force which patrols the West Bank. They tend to see the Israeli military as composed of two separate armies. But in reality, the two armies operate as one. You need the Air Force and intelligence units to coordinate the ground troops; they provide the data used by troops on patrol, they tell them which buildings to demolish. So it's a false binary, in terms of the ethical valence that Israelis put on it. But it does a lot of ideological work in allowing the more liberal sectors to rationalize their complicity, by seeing themselves as somewhat removed from what is going on in the West Bank.

How has the IDF been affected by October Seventh and the wars that have followed?

Overall, it has emerged as a stronger, even more pervasive institution. The attacks of October Seventh sparked an unprecedented reaction across Israeli society. There was a mass mobilization, with 300,000 reservists called up. Israelis from across the political spectrum prepared food for soldiers, fundraised for military equipment. Every news channel

broadcast footage of the attacks on loop. With time, footage of Hamas's atrocities was followed by aerial images of Israeli airstrikes and a running ticker of how many 'targets' had been struck by Israeli munitions. Slogans of national unity were plastered everywhere: 'Together we will win' was printed on eggs in grocery stores and on bumper stickers. There was a huge shift of the Israeli populace to the right. You felt it in the cities, and in sectors that had, for the last few decades, become increasingly detached from politics, and believed that the status quo of containment could continue indefinitely. October Seventh didn't lead to any questioning of Israeli policy, but to a mass embrace of belligerent militarism. The Jewish-Israeli public rallied behind calls to 'finish' Hamas, without any qualms about mounting civilian casualties, let alone the larger strategic picture. The media coverage helped; it continued for a long time—and likewise, the Israeli media would never properly report on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza; only in the summer of 2025 did some channels devote airtime to the situation Palestinians were enduring on the ground, airing scattered reports of the famine. As a measure of public attitudes: when Yair Lapid, the former prime minister, said in October that the military shouldn't kill children, it was seen as a disgrace by the majority of Israelis.

But divisions within the Army have widened, too. There are many reports of battalions of religious-Zionist conscripts in the field disobeying orders from military command—looting Palestinian homes in Gaza, demolishing buildings, desecrating mosques, establishing outposts in Lebanon or the West Bank. The significance of this shouldn't be overstated; arguably it is part of the eternal push and pull within Zionism, whose various elements still work as a single entity to ensure territorial annexation and Palestinian displacement. Nevertheless, religious Zionism has expanded its influence, particularly in combat formations, as non-believers opt for other service branches. Many of those killed in Gaza and Lebanon were in religious-Zionist frontline units and are seen by their comrades as shouldering the burden of the war. Political theology is reportedly more prominent in speeches given to new conscripts. Over 40 per cent of infantry officer cadets now come out of the religious-Zionist education system, including schools and pre-military academies closely aligned with the settler movement.

With Israel waging a multi-front war, there have also been growing manpower pressures. The IDF has said it's lacking some 12,000 troops.

This has made Haredi conscription a flashpoint. In 1948, when Ben-Gurion signed their exemption from military service into law, they were a minuscule part of Israeli society, and this was seen as a harmless way to rebuild the religious community after the Holocaust. Now the Haredim are closer to 14 per cent of the population, and broad swathes of the population resent their exemption—especially given the cost non-Haredi communities have paid since October Seventh, as they see it.

What was the public attitude to the spread of war to Lebanon?

Most Israelis saw operations there as a major victory. They killed Nasrallah. The 'pager' attack in September 2024 was seen as a Mossad masterstroke. Rockets from Hezbollah had displaced Israelis in northern Israel, so the military operation in Lebanon was seen as necessary to ensure that people could go back to their homes. This spring, as Israeli operations continued and defence minister Israel Katz and others demanded the security buffer be pushed forward, there was dissent over the strategy and the fact that they needed to mobilize reservists to hold the line. This recalls the occupation of southern Lebanon after the 1982 war, which was also controversial as it dragged on. But the number of those actually protesting these policies is very small.

Was this also true for the hostilities against Iran?

The war against Iran was immensely popular at first. Regardless of Netanyahu or the IDF's true intentions, most Israelis believed there would be a regime change and there was real excitement about this. Even during the ten-day war in June 2025, in between airstrikes people were recording videos addressed to the Iranian public saying, 'Do it, topple the regime. You can do it.' It shows how misinformed the public is. The poll boost Netanyahu received didn't last as the war dragged on. But there was consensus for it across the political spectrum. Most of the opposition say there will be another confrontation with Iran, because Netanyahu didn't 'finish the job'.

What impact did the Iranian missile strikes have?

The strikes certainly caused some damage. When I was there in July, you would see impact sites. A strike on an apartment complex in southern Tel Aviv killed people and displaced many more; a strike on a shelter in

a majority-Haredi town outside Jerusalem killed people. To have Iranian ballistic missiles hitting civilian population centres was unprecedented. But this was still quite contained and didn't have much lasting effect. The media consensus was 'this is what we have to do to topple the Iranian regime.' So the ideological effect was reinforcing.

How soon after October Seventh did national fractures begin to re-emerge?

Within a month or so. That is the story of Israeli politics; but how consequential the divisions are is another question. The opposition blamed Netanyahu for the attack and for scuppering one hostage deal after another. By the summer of 2024, a large-scale protest movement had coalesced among the sectors that had demonstrated against Netanyahu over judicial reform. As combat fatigue set in, it spread among reservists in the armed forces. But this opposition was never about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the moral and ethical consequences of the war. That was simply not part of the public discourse. The protests were about the hostages; that Netanyahu doesn't have a plan; that he's keeping us at war to stay in power.

Does the opposition's lack of alternative strategy or political imagination help to explain the lacklustre performance of the Eisenkot bloc in the October 27 election? How do you read the results?

The immediate outcome is no surprise: Netanyahu presides as caretaker prime minister while the party leaderships wheel and deal, trying to cobble together a 61-seat coalition in the 120-seat Knesset; or, if they fail to do so, fight another election. Israel has a single-constituency, proportional representation system, with closed-list voting—you vote for a party, not a local candidate—and a low threshold of 3.25 per cent. This means that parties which get a few hundred thousand votes may have four or five seats, bargaining chips for a coalition. In the event, the number of votes cast for Likud and for the largest opposition party (this year, Eisenkot's Yashar; in 2022, Lapid's Yesh Atid), has barely changed since 2022. Once again, Likud is slightly ahead but lacks a parliamentary majority. Despite having overseen three years of multi-front war that have turned Israel into a pariah state on the world stage, Netanyahu's limited success was to be expected. When it comes to national security, many Israelis see the destruction of Gaza and the expansion of Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank as evidence of a job well done. And,

perhaps even more consequentially, Netanyahu's government has kept the economy afloat in spite of these geopolitical tectonics.

The most notable point in the election was the surge in Arab-Israeli turnout, driven by the hope of squeezing out Ben-Gvir's Jewish-supremacist Otzma Yehudit party, and thus getting rid of the notoriously brutal National Security minister. This government intensified policies that degrade the living conditions of Palestinians, more than any other: from purposefully not policing towns and neighbourhoods that are plagued by organized crime, to arresting university students who posted Instagram stories about IDF atrocities in Gaza and demolishing unofficial villages in places like the Negev desert, where Bedouin communities live. In the month leading up to the election, Israel's Central Elections Committee went so far as to attempt to bar the two main Palestinian parties from participating in the elections. So Palestinians in Israel were voting, in many ways, for their own survival. Ben-Gvir is still in the Knesset. But the two Palestinian Arab parties won 19 seats between them: the centre-left Joint List got eleven and Ra'am, led by Mansour Abbas, got eight.

Since October Seventh, though, hatred of Palestinians has shaped political discourse as never before, and neither Netanyahu's bloc (53 seats) nor the opposition (48 seats) are likely to form a governing coalition with them. This is a marked shift from 2021, when Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett both promised to partner with Ra'am to form a government in the lead up to the election, with Bennett ultimately doing so. Now Israeli politicians appear committed to excluding Palestinians from any substantive role in Israeli politics, even if it means another round of elections. Isaac Herzog, Israel's president, has promised to alleviate a stalemate by doing all he can to form a grand coalition between Yashar and Likud. Though Eisenkot opposes this proposition, elements of his party have communicated their willingness to do so rather than explore other options, like partnering with the Arab parties. In short, and as most forecasts have emphasized, much political manoeuvring will unfold in the weeks and months to come.

Israel's unstable coalitions dramatize what are, for the most part, small differences between the two blocs, which have long constituted different strains of the same ultranationalist right-wing ideology: one championing territorial expansion and Palestinian displacement, the other professing nominal commitments to liberal values whilst pursuing the

same illiberal policies. That is certainly the case today; when it comes to military policies in the occupied Palestinian territories and beyond, there is little of substance between them. Eisenkot's bloc consists of Yashar, Bennett's and Yair Lapid's B'Yachad, Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu and Yair Golan's Democrats. There are divisions within this camp, but they are not that meaningful. All are hawkish when it comes to foreign policy; only Arab parties speak with determination about a peace process. Bennett, the former cybersecurity CEO and head of the Yesha settlers' council, is somewhat more aligned with Likud policies when it comes to the West Bank and Gaza than Eisenkot, who criticizes Netanyahu as a poor military strategist and calls for more attention to be given to political and diplomatic solutions. That said, Eisenkot rose up through the armed forces—he's a former IDF chief of staff—and is famous for masterminding the Dahiya doctrine, conceived to justify pounding the southern suburbs of Beirut during Israel's 2006 offensive in Lebanon. He served in Netanyahu's war cabinet after October Seventh and has faulted him for not 'finishing the job' in Iran.

There are more significant divergences on domestic issues—the rising influence of religious fundamentalism, attacks on Israel's judiciary, the Haredi draft exemption. Under Netanyahu's government, demands for gender-segregated public spaces and business closures on Shabbat have grown louder. But as in the past, the main differences between the two camps lie in their public-relations strategy. Netanyahu and his far-right ministers openly champion Jewish-supremacist ideologies, making no secret of the fact that they want a continuous Jewish state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. Eisenkot, Golan and Bennett have pledged to 'rein in' the vigilante settlers who run free in the West Bank. But short of any more concrete changes—withdrawing settlers and rolling back sanctions on the Palestinian economy, let alone pursuing a just solution to the Palestinian question—their alternative lacks conviction.

What are the longer-term drivers of the shift of the whole political field to the right? And what explains the growth of religious Zionism?

The period of the Second Intifada was crucial. Growing up in that security environment, being told to be fearful of Palestinian terrorism, pushed younger generations to the right. The ideology of separation—the regime of borders, separate highways, checkpoints—consolidated this. Israeli and Palestinian communities were sealed off from each

other as they had never been before. With this, any real discussion of the question of Palestine came to an end. What do we do about the occupation? Is it temporary? Is it corrupting Israeli society? These questions were debated to some extent by Israelis in the 1980s and 90s, but with the Second Intifada, they vanished from the public sphere. As for religious Zionism: partly it's growing through high birthrates. But secular Israelis are becoming more religious, too, and this maps onto the political shifts underway. You see it across the country: places that once were secular are now religious. West Jerusalem used to have many cafés and bars that were open on Shabbat; now there are only a few, and religious Jews often stage protests against them being open, which never would have happened fifteen years ago. There are 'settler' movements bent on Judaizing secular neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv.

How significant has emigration from Israel been since October Seventh?

The most recent figure is 300,000. It has certainly had an impact on the already anaemic and embattled left-wing camp of human-rights activists and academics. Among more centrist white-collar professionals there is a common sentiment of, 'If Benjamin Netanyahu wins another election, I'm leaving'. Some are questioning whether they want to raise their kids in Israel, in conditions of constant war, and the education system is in a bad way, the lowest-rated in the OECD. For those who have opportunities elsewhere, there are growing incentives to emigrate, if being part of the Zionist project is not driving you to stay.

How sustainable is Israel's current economic model, in the face of prolonged mobilization of reserves and increased military spending, currently approaching 8 per cent of GDP?

It's been surprisingly resilient, though that can't go on forever. Two separate economies have sedimented under Netanyahu's long rule. There is the high-tech economy, which transformed Tel Aviv and its surroundings into hubs of global capital, with multi-national tech firms filling up skyscrapers and luxury condos crowding the skyline. It accounted for 50 per cent of the growth in GDP last year and almost 60 per cent of exports. Then there is the domestic economy, encompassing everything from manufacturing and construction to retail, transport and public services, where wages remain low in spite of skyrocketing costs of living and the erosion of the social-safety net. Netanyahu's subsidies to the ultra-orthodox and

the settlers have offset some of this. Israel's constant military aggression actually helps the high-tech economy to grind on. Moshe Patel, the head of Israel's missile defence organization, championed the way the stock exchange kept going while Iranian ballistic missiles were hurtling into Israeli airspace. Tel Aviv cafés will fill up with remote workers plying Claude with coding assignments, even if the bar across the street was bombed out the night before by a Khorramshahr-4.

But in the other economy, too, the mobilization of thousands of reservists who can't work remotely has proved sustainable for far longer than anyone predicted. Many reservists have opted to receive higher payouts for their service—guarding military installations in southern Lebanon, for instance—rather than returning to their old jobs in sectors that are flagging. Some analysts have described this as an emerging reserve economy.[4] How long it will remain viable is another question. As defence expenditure rises, so does the national debt, which now constitutes 70 per cent of Israel's GDP. With daily airstrikes across southern Lebanon and Gaza, and plans for a renewed air war on Iran, no change in defence expenditure is on the horizon. Global economic shifts might mean the high-tech economy could take a blow; earlier this month *Haaretz* reported that unemployment in the tech sector was rising and many of those who power Israel's high-tech economy—the educated liberal elite—are choosing to move abroad.

How do Israelis view the country's pariah status since the obliteration of Gaza, amid widespread charges of genocide?

The sentiment in Israel is that the country's pariah status is the result of rising antisemitism. Most Israelis view the last three years of war on Gaza as a righteous attempt to defend the nation from Hamas's aggression. Many like to blame European protests against the war on Arab immigration, and demonstrations in the US on Iranian influence campaigns. Not all; as we've discussed, emigration has been breaking records every year since 2023. But the majority of Israelis interpret charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice, sanctions by European countries and plummeting popular support among US voters as the outcome of deep-seated antisemitism, rather than a response to specific policies.

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[4] Assaf Bondy and Adam Raz, 'How Israel's War Economy Defied Economic Predictions', *Jacobin*, 16 September 2025.

Three years ago, Israel looked to be on course to normalize relations with its Arab neighbours, raising the prospect of a US-backed regional settlement that would permanently sideline the Palestinian question. Security cooperation with the Gulf states has continued throughout the war on Gaza, and in some cases deepened, but the diplomatic opening to Riyadh has stalled. Where does this leave Israeli strategy for the region and what future is there for the Abraham Accords?

Like the trade in technology, intelligence and diamonds in the years prior, the Accords went through because the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain had steadily subordinated the Palestine question to their leaders' own political interests. The agreement allowed Netanyahu to continue building settlements in the West Bank and bombing Gaza. Which is why the destruction of Gaza did not result in any fundamental change—Bahrain and the UAE have maintained diplomatic relations with Israel since October Seventh.

On the regional question: Saudi Arabia always diverged from its neighbours in its demand for deeper political shifts when it came to the Palestine question and it's clear that the war on Gaza has made the prospect of formal Saudi-Israeli relations more distant than before. But I would follow Trita Parsi in arguing that what has really prevented the Accords from expanding is the joint US-Israeli war on Iran. America's inability to follow through on security guarantees paved the way for new regional agreements, like the one signed between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan this summer. Though Israel has not formally announced an end to the Abraham Accords, the security establishment's post-October Seventh security conception is, in many ways, a return to a pre-Oslo isolationism: in other words, abandoning efforts to expand regional diplomatic relations and doubling down on a strategy that a young Benjamin Netanyahu once championed as 'peace through deterrence'.

The US and Europe still cling to the idea of a two-state 'solution', as they understand it. Is that completely ruled out in Israel today?

Yes, definitely. The appeals by Thomas Friedman *et al*. in the *New York Times* are completely out of touch. The only question is when exactly it ended. It's not been part of Israeli public discourse for at least a decade. In the 2010s and early 2020s, the structuring framework was a policy of

containment, as well as 'shrinking the conflict'. The aim was essentially to make the status quo sustainable for as long as possible. But this is now widely seen as a failure. Today, Likud and the far-right Smotrich/Ben-Gvir camp want annexation of the West Bank; for them, occupation and separation are first steps towards expelling the Palestinians, or subjecting them to permanent second-class status, with no pretence of full citizenship. The E1 plan that they have been pushing forward entails new settlements which would completely encircle East Jerusalem and isolate it from the rest of the West Bank, ensuring that Jerusalem could never be the capital of a Palestinian state.

Israel currently maintains 'buffer zones' across southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria, beyond the Golan Heights, in addition to the occupied West Bank and nearly two-thirds of Gaza. What is the strategy behind this expanding footprint?

Israel has never declared its borders, a manoeuvre that has allowed its sovereignty to gradually extend across the West Bank, the Golan Heights and Gaza, with the brute force necessary to sustain it. Buffer zones in southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria fit this model of territorial expansion through military operations that are framed as merely temporary flexes of power, necessary for Israel's security, but which in practice entail a permanent state of occupation and war. In fact, Israel's Institute for National Security Studies recently published a memo stipulating that Israel's security framework today is premised on the extension of a strategy long deployed in the West Bank and Gaza to the entire region.[5] The assumption is that Israel's neighbours are not real nation-states but 'collections of tribes and ethnic groups' that should be destabilized through 'pre-emptive attack and forward defence' in all areas of 'friction with Arab populations'. From Lebanon and Syria to the West Bank and Gaza, the long-term strategic vision is, in other words, the permanent state of war Israeli leaders from Moshe Dayan to Netanyahu have long trumpeted.

American attitudes towards Israel have shifted markedly in recent years. Gallup polling now records greater sympathy for the Palestinians than for the

[5] Tamir Hayman *et al.*, 'Israel's National Security Balance', Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv 2026.

Israelis. At the same time, US military and diplomatic support remains firm, and there is little sign that public criticism has seriously dented support for Israel in Congress. Is Israeli influence in Washington beginning to erode, or does the lobby hold as much sway as ever?

The line in Israel is that the country must prepare for a day in the near future when its most important ally will abandon it, halt the flow of weapons and financial aid, and cast the country out on its own—becoming, as Netanyahu put it to much fanfare in 2025, a 'super Sparta'. For now, this line overstates the current situation. While it's true that support for Israel is falling in the US, the lobby's influence remains as strong as ever—evinced by the fact that the Trump administration joined Israel in bombing Iran. Though some Republicans are balking at the special relationship, the Trump administration is stacked with figures deeply entangled with the Israel lobby—Kushner, Witkoff, Wiles, Huckabee, to name a few. New policies are in place to entrench it more deeply even as public opinion shifts; the Defense Authorization Act will bind Israel and America's weapons industries through joint production, technology transfers, licensing agreements and more.

Western commentators have been desperately hoping for an opposition government that will allow a reset of relations with the United States. How much has this been a factor in the election?

This is something Western commentators like to talk about. The Israeli electorate is not preoccupied with American support. America is a great cultural force, but there's a feeling that 'nobody understands us, nobody understands the challenges we face'. Years ago, the maxim 'shooting and crying' captured Israel's orientation in this regard, but that has disappeared, because it implied that Israelis had to explain themselves. Now there is no shame in what Israel does. And that comes with a feeling that Israel doesn't have to explain itself to America or beg for their help.

Netanyahu, especially after October Seventh, has done an effective job of articulating this vision of a sovereign Israel acting alone, not needing America or being constrained by it when it comes to the use of force. He has even advocated moving on from reliance on US military support. I think it's an election ploy and not likely to happen, but this is a

popular message in Israel. It's very different from how many in the West conceived of Israel's relationship with the United States. Behind closed doors, politicians and decision-makers naturally care about diplomatic and military support. But they don't feel it's under threat. And amongst the right and centre-right, the thinking is increasingly: 'We don't need the West. If they want to do an arms embargo, we'll make our own. We don't need to be subservient to them.'