

# The Geopolitics of Israel: Biblical and Modern

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## Introduction

The founding principle of geopolitics is that place — geography — plays a significant role in determining how nations will behave. If that theory is true, then there ought to be a deep continuity in a nation's foreign policy. Israel is a laboratory for this theory, since it has existed in three different manifestations in roughly the same place, twice in antiquity and once in modernity. If geopolitics is correct, then Israeli foreign policy, independent of policymakers, technology or the identity of neighbors, ought to have important common features. This is, therefore, a discussion of common principles in Israeli foreign policy over nearly 3,000 years.

For convenience, we will use the term "Israel" to connote all of the Hebrew and Jewish entities that have existed in the Levant since the invasion of the region as chronicled in the Book of Joshua. As always, geopolitics requires a consideration of three dimensions: the internal geopolitics of Israel, the interaction of Israel and the immediate neighbors who share borders with it, and Israel's interaction with what we will call great powers, beyond Israel's borderlands.

*This study was originally published by Stratfor in 2008 as the first in a series of monographs on the geopolitics of globally important countries.*



*First-century home in Capernaum (Source: bible.org)*



*July 1945, Buchenwald survivors arriving at Haifa (Public domain)*



*The Old City of Jerusalem, 2009 (Source: Kyle Taylor via Flickr\*)*

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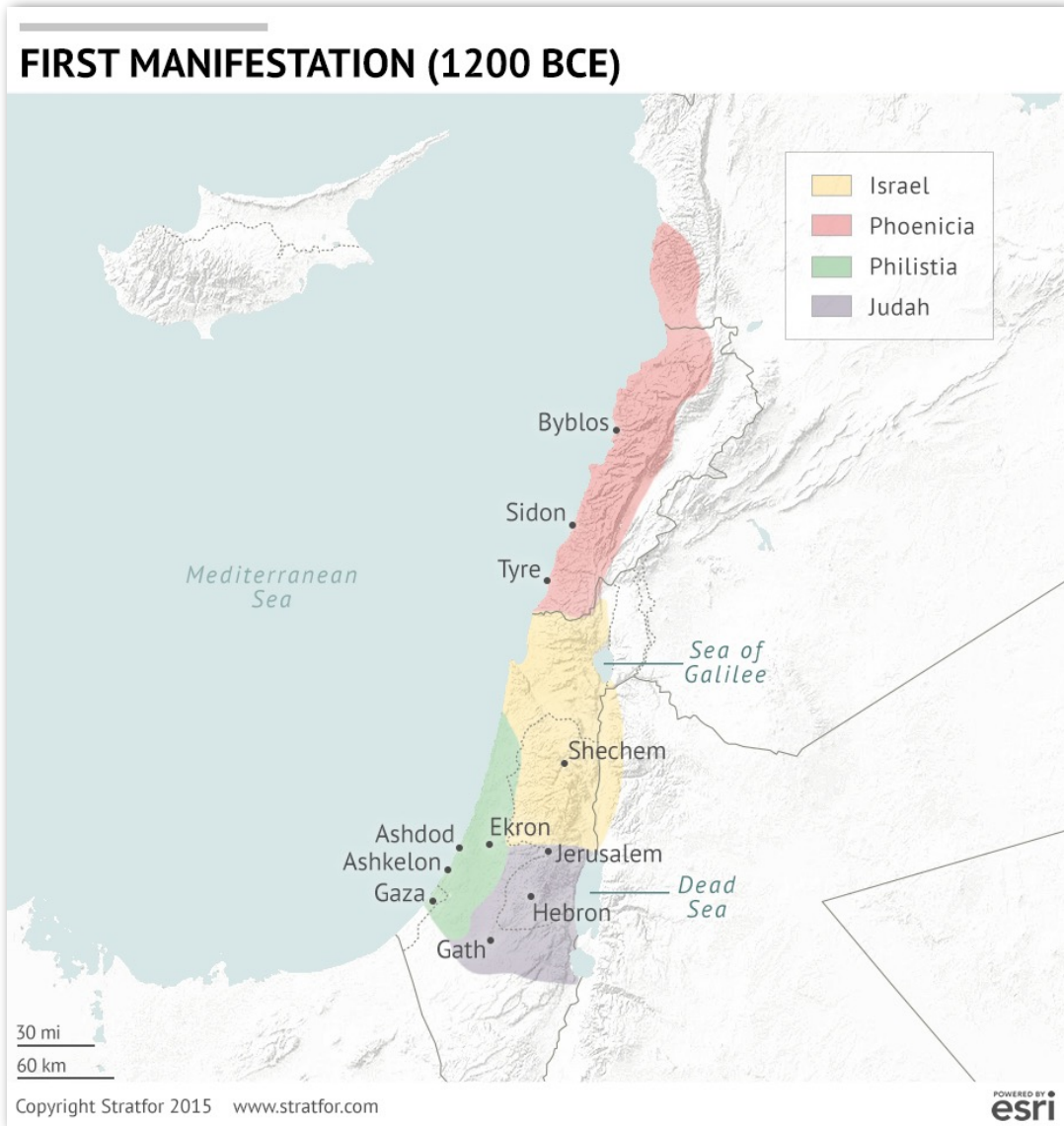
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# Israel in Biblical Times

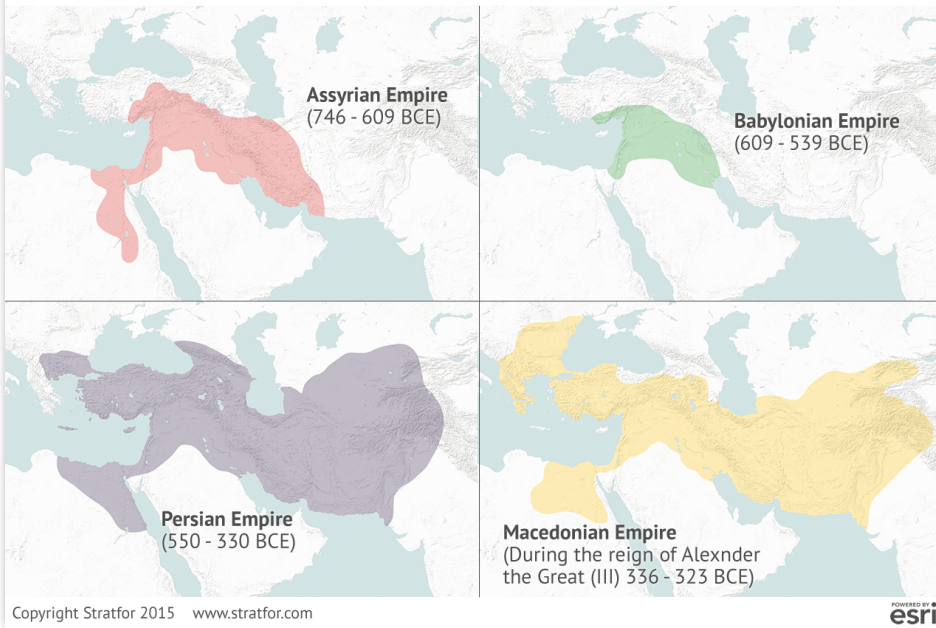
Israel has manifested itself three times in history. The first manifestation began with the invasion led by Joshua and lasted through its division into two kingdoms, the Babylonian conquest of the Kingdom of Judah and the deportation to Babylon early in the sixth century B.C.



The second manifestation began when Israel was recreated in 540 B.C. by the Persians, who had defeated the Babylonians. The nature of this second manifestation changed in the fourth century B.C., when Greece overran the Persian Empire and Israel, and again in the first century B.C., when the Romans conquered the region.



## SECOND MANIFESTATION



The second manifestation saw Israel as a small actor within the framework of larger imperial powers, a situation that lasted until the destruction of the Jewish vassal state by the Romans.

Israel's third manifestation began in 1948, following (as in the other cases) an ingathering of at least some of the Jews who had been dispersed after

conquests. Israel's founding takes place in the context of the decline and fall of the British Empire and must, at least in part, be understood as part of British imperial history.

## THIRD MANIFESTATION (1948)

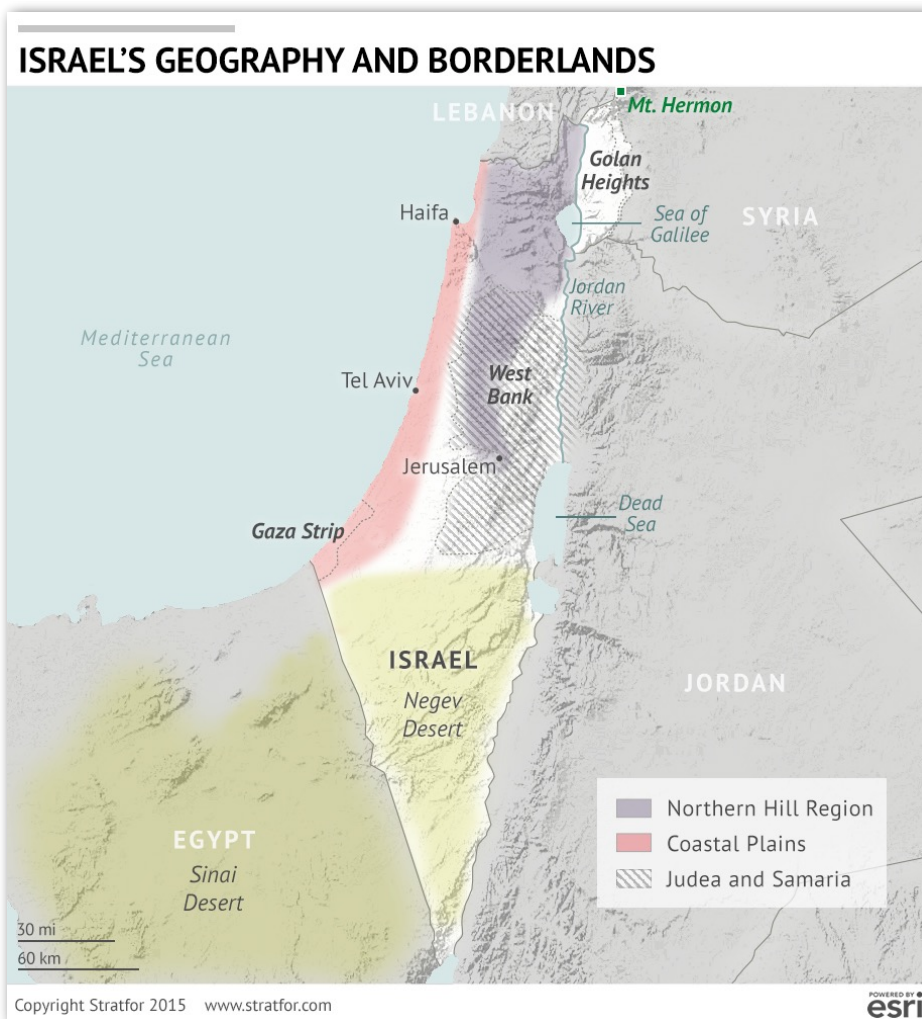


During its first 50 years, Israel plays a pivotal role in the confrontation of the United States and the Soviet Union and, in some senses, is hostage to the dynamics of these two countries. In other words, like the first two manifestations of Israel, the third finds Israel continually struggling among independence, internal tension and imperial ambition.

## Israeli Geography and Borderlands

At its height, under King David, Israel extended from the Sinai to the Euphrates, encompassing Damascus. It occupied some, but relatively little, of the coastal region, an area beginning at what today is Haifa and running south to Jaffa, just north of today's Tel Aviv. The coastal area to the north was held by Phoenicia, the area to the south by Philistines. It is essential to understand that Israel's size and shape shifted over time. For example, Judah under the Hasmoneans did not include the Negev but did include the Golan. The general locale of Israel is fixed. Its precise borders have never been.

Thus, it is perhaps better to begin with what never was part of Israel. Israel never included the Sinai Peninsula. Along the coast, it never stretched much farther north than the Litani River in today's Lebanon. Apart from David's extreme extension (and fairly tenuous control) to the north, Israel's territory never stretched as far as Damascus, although it frequently held the Golan Heights. Israel extended many times to both sides of the Jordan but never deep into the Jordanian Desert. It never extended southeast into the Arabian Peninsula.



Israel consists generally of three parts. First, it always has had the northern hill region, stretching from the foothills of Mount Hermon south to Jerusalem. Second, it always contains some of the coastal plain from today's Tel Aviv north to Haifa. Third, it occupies area between Jerusalem and the Jordan River — today's West Bank. At times, it controls all or part of the Negev, including the coastal region between the Sinai to the Tel Aviv area. It may be larger than this at various times in history, and sometimes smaller, but it normally holds all or part of these three regions.

## ISRAEL'S GEOGRAPHY AND BORDERLANDS



Israel is well-buffered in three directions. The Sinai Desert protects it against the Egyptians. In general, the Sinai has held little attraction for the Egyptians. The difficulty of deploying forces in the eastern Sinai poses severe logistical problems for them, particularly during a prolonged presence. Unless Egypt can rapidly move through the Sinai north into the coastal plain, where it can sustain its forces more readily, deploying in the Sinai is difficult and unrewarding. Therefore, so long as Israel is not so weak as to make an attack on the coastal plain a viable option, or unless Egypt is motivated by an outside imperial power, Israel does not face a threat from the southwest.



Israel is similarly protected from the southeast. The deserts southeast of Eilat-Aqaba are virtually impassable. No large force could approach from that direction, although smaller raiding parties could. The tribes of the Arabian Peninsula lack the reach or the size to pose a threat to Israel, unless massed and aligned with other forces. Even then, the approach from the southeast is not one that they are likely to take. The Negev is secure from that direction.

The eastern approaches are similarly secured by desert, which begins about 20 to 30 miles east of the Jordan River. While indigenous forces exist in the borderland east of the Jordan, they lack the numbers to be able to penetrate decisively west of the Jordan. Indeed, the normal model is that, so long as Israel controls Judea and Samaria (the modern-day West Bank), then the East Bank of the Jordan River is under the political and sometimes military domination of Israel — sometimes directly through settlement, sometimes indirectly through political influence, or economic or security leverage.

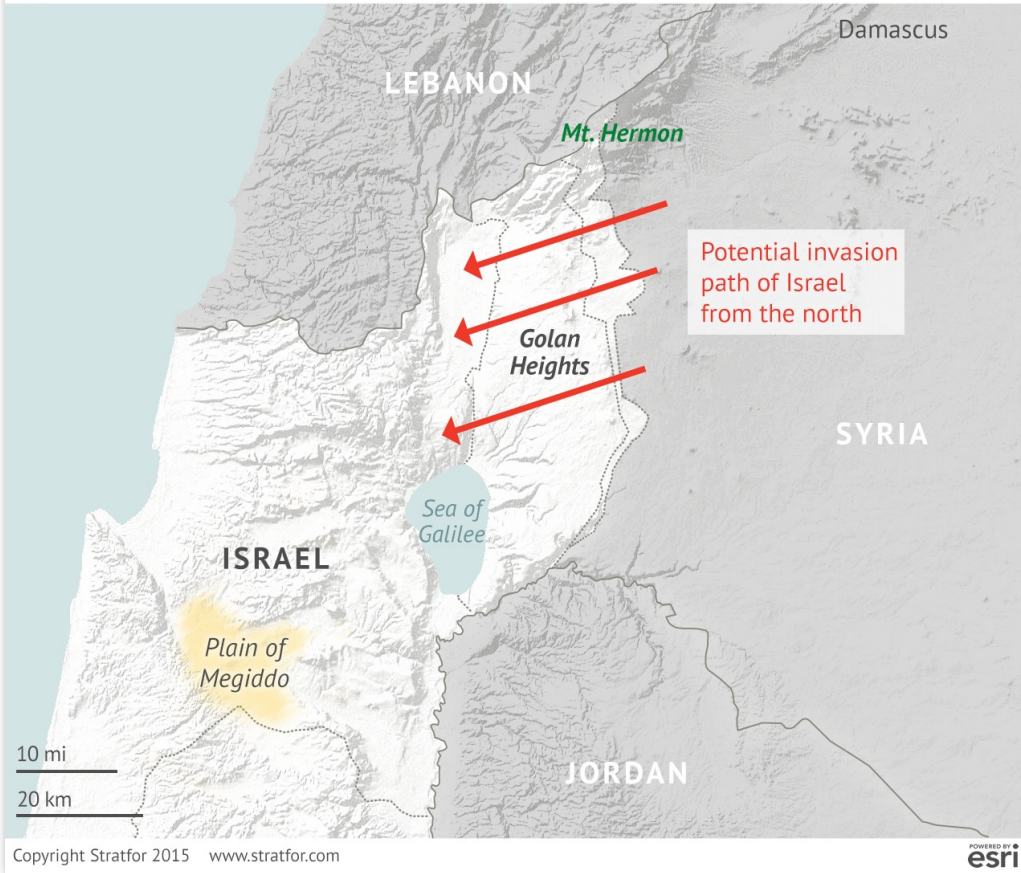
Israel's vulnerability is in the north. There is no natural buffer between Phoenicia and its successor entities (today's Lebanon) to the direct north. The best defense line for Israel in the north is the Litani River, but this is not an insurmountable boundary under any circumstance. However, the area along the coast north of Israel does not present a serious threat. The coastal area prospers through trade in the Mediterranean basin. It is oriented toward the sea and to the trade routes to the east, not to the south. If it does anything, this area protects those trade routes and has no appetite for a conflict that might disrupt trade. It stays out of Israel's way, for the most part.

Moreover, as a commercial area, this region is generally wealthy, a factor that increases predators around it and social conflict within. It is an area prone to instability. Israel frequently tries to extend its influence northward for commercial reasons, as one of the predators, and this can entangle Israel in its regional politics. But barring this self-induced problem, the threat to Israel from the north is minimal, despite the absence of natural boundaries and the large population. On occasion, there is spillover of conflicts from the north, but not to a degree that might threaten regime survival in Israel.

The neighbor that is always a threat lies to the northeast. Syria — or, more precisely, the area governed by Damascus at any time — is populous and frequently has no direct outlet to the sea. It is, therefore, generally poor. The area to its north, Asia Minor, is heavily mountainous. Syria cannot project power to the north except with great difficulty, but powers in Asia Minor can move south. Syria's eastern flank is buffered by a desert that stretches to the Euphrates.

Therefore, when there is no threat from the north, Syria's interest — after securing itself internally — is to gain access to the coast. Its primary channel is directly westward, toward the rich cities of the northern Levantine coast, with which it trades heavily. An alternative

## THE GOLAN HEIGHTS



interest is southwestward, toward the southern Levantine coast controlled by Israel.

As can be seen, Syria can be interested in Israel only selectively. When it is interested, it has a serious battle problem. To attack Israel, it would have to strike between Mount Hermon and the Sea of Galilee, an area about 25 miles wide. The Syrians potentially can

attack south of the sea, but only if they are prepared to fight through this region and then attack on extended supply lines. If an attack is mounted along the main route, Syrian forces must descend the Golan Heights and then fight through the hilly Galilee before reaching the coastal plain — sometimes with guerrillas holding out in the Galilean hills. The Galilee is an area that is relatively easy to defend and difficult to attack. Therefore, it is only once Syria takes the Galilee, and can control its lines of supply against guerrilla attack, that its real battle begins.

To reach the coast or move toward Jerusalem, Syria must fight through a plain in front of a line of low hills. This is the decisive battleground where massed Israeli forces, close to lines of supply, can defend against dispersed Syrian forces on extended lines of supply. It is no accident that Megiddo — or Armageddon, as the plain is sometimes referred to — has apocalyptic meaning. This is the point at which any move from Syria would be decided. But a Syrian offensive would have a tough fight to reach Megiddo, and a tougher one as it deploys on the plain.

On the surface, Israel lacks strategic depth, but this is true only on the surface. It faces limited threats from southern neighbors. To its east, it faces only a narrow strip of populated area east of the Jordan. To the north, there is a maritime commercial entity, Syria operating alone, forced through the narrow gap of the Mount Hermon-Galilee line and operating on extended supply lines, can be dealt with readily.

There is a risk of simultaneous attacks from multiple directions. Depending on the forces deployed and the degree of coordination between them, this can pose a problem for Israel. However, even here the Israelis have the tremendous advantage of fighting on interior lines. Egypt and Syria, fighting on external lines (and widely separated fronts), would have enormous difficulty transferring forces from one front to another. Israel, on interior lines (fronts close to each other with good transportation), would be able to move its forces from front to front rapidly, allowing for sequential engagement and thereby the defeat of enemies.

Unless enemies are carefully coordinated and initiate war simultaneously — and deploy substantially superior force on at least one front — Israel can initiate war at a time of its choosing or else move its forces rapidly between fronts, negating much of the advantage of size that the attackers might have.

There is another aspect to the problem of multifront war. Egypt usually has minimal interests along the Levant, having its own coast and an orientation to the south toward the headwaters of the Nile. On the rare occasions when Egypt does move through the Sinai and attacks to the north and northeast, it is in an expansionary mode. By the time it consolidates and exploits the coastal plain, it would be powerful enough to threaten Syria. From Syria's point of view, the only thing more dangerous than Israel is an Egypt in control of Israel. Therefore, the probability of a coordinated north-south strike at Israel is rare, is rarely coordinated and usually is not designed to be a mortal blow. It is defeated by Israel's strategic advantage of interior lines.



## Israeli Geography and the Convergence Zone

Therefore, it is not surprising that Israel's first incarnation lasted as long as it did — some five centuries. What is interesting and what must be considered is why Israel (now considered as the northern kingdom) was defeated by the Assyrians and Judea, then defeated by Babylon. To understand this, we need to consider the broader geography of Israel's location.

Israel is located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, on the Levant. As we have seen, when Israel is intact, it will tend to be the dominant power in the Levant. Therefore, Israeli resources must generally be dedicated for land warfare, leaving little over for naval warfare. In general, although Israel had excellent harbors and access to wood for shipbuilding, it never was a major Mediterranean naval power. It never projected power into the sea. The area to the north of Israel has always been a maritime power, but Israel, the area south of Mount Hermon, was always forced to be a land power.

The Levant in general and Israel in particular has always been a magnet for great powers. No Mediterranean empire could be fully secure unless it controlled the Levant. Whether it was Rome or Carthage, a Mediterranean empire that wanted to control both the northern and southern littorals needed to anchor its eastern flank on the Levant. For one thing, without the Levant, a Mediterranean power would be entirely dependent on sea lanes for controlling the other shore. Moving troops solely by sea creates transport limitations and logistical problems.

It also leaves imperial lines vulnerable to interdiction — sometimes merely from pirates, a problem that plagued Rome's sea transport. A land bridge, or a land bridge with minimal water crossings that can be easily defended, is a vital supplement to the sea for the movement of large numbers of troops. Once the Hellespont (now known as the Dardanelles) is crossed, the coastal route through southern Turkey, down the Levant and along the Mediterranean's southern shore, provides such an alternative.

There is an additional consideration. If a Mediterranean empire leaves the Levant unoccupied, it opens the door to the possibility of a great power originating to the east seizing the ports of the Levant and challenging the Mediterranean power for maritime domination. In short, control of the Levant binds a Mediterranean empire together while denying a challenger from the east the opportunity to enter the Mediterranean. Holding the Levant, and controlling Israel, is a necessary preventive measure for a Mediterranean empire.

Israel is also important to any empire originating to the east of Israel, either in the Tigris-Euphrates basin or in Persia. For either, security could be assured only once it had an anchor on the Levant. Macedonian expansion under Alexander demonstrated that a power controlling Levantine and Turkish ports could support aggressive operations far to the east, to the Hindu Kush and beyond. While Turkish ports might have sufficed for offensive

## CONVERGENCE ZONE



operations, simply securing the Bosphorus still left the southern flank exposed. Therefore, by holding the Levant, an eastern power protected itself against attacks from Mediterranean powers.

The Levant was also important to any empire originating to the north or south of Israel. If Egypt decided to move beyond the Nile Basin and North Africa eastward, it would move first through the Sinai and then northward along the coastal plain, securing sea lanes to Egypt. When Asia Minor powers such as the Ottoman Empire developed, there was a natural tendency to move southward to control the eastern Mediterranean. The Levant is the crossroads of continents, and Israel lies in the path of many imperial ambitions.

Israel therefore occupies what might be called the convergence zone of the Eastern Hemisphere. A European power trying to dominate the Mediterranean or expand eastward, an eastern power trying to dominate the space between the Hindu Kush and the Mediterranean, a North African power moving toward the east, or a northern power moving south — all must converge on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and therefore on Israel. Of these, the European power and the eastern power must be the most concerned with Israel. For either, there is no choice but to secure it as an anchor.

## Internal Geopolitics

Israel is geographically divided into three regions, which traditionally have produced three different types of people. Its coastal plain facilitates commerce, serving as the interface between eastern trade routes and the sea. It is the home of merchants and manufacturers, cosmopolitans — not as cosmopolitan as Phoenicia or Lebanon, but cosmopolitan for Israel. The northeast is hill country, closest to the unruliness north of the Litani River and to the Syrian threat. It breeds farmers and warriors. The area south of Jerusalem is hard desert country, more conducive to herdsman and warriors than anything else. Jerusalem is where these three regions are balanced and governed.



Source: Lehava Taybe via Israeli Pikiwiki project\*



Source: Israel Defense Force\*\*



Source: Avishai Teicher via Israeli Pikiwiki project\*

There are obviously deep differences built into Israel's geography and inhabitants, particularly between the herdsmen of the southern deserts and the northern hill dwellers. The coastal dwellers, rich but less warlike than the others, hold the balance or are the prize to be pursued. In the division of the original kingdom between Israel and Judea, we saw the alliance of the coast with the Galilee, while Jerusalem was held by the desert dwellers. The consequence of the division was that Israel in the north ultimately was conquered by Assyrians from the northeast, while Babylon was able to swallow Judea.

Social divisions in Israel obviously do not have to follow geographical lines. However, over time, these divisions must manifest themselves. For example, the coastal plain is inherently

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more cosmopolitan than the rest of the country. The interests of its inhabitants lie more with trading partners in the Mediterranean and the rest of the world than with their countrymen. Their standard of living is higher, and their commitment to traditions is lower. Therefore, there is an inherent tension between their immediate interests and those of the Galileans, who live more precarious, warlike lives. Countries can be divided over lesser issues — and when Israel is divided, it is vulnerable even to regional threats.

We say "even" because geography dictates that regional threats are less menacing than might be expected. The fact that Israel would be outnumbered demographically should all its neighbors turn on it is less important than the fact that it has adequate buffers in most directions, that the ability of neighbors to coordinate an attack is minimal and that their appetite for such an attack is even less. The single threat that Israel faces from the northeast can readily be managed if the Israelis create a united front there. When Israel was overrun by a Damascus-based power, it was deeply divided internally.

It is important to add one consideration to our discussion of buffers, which is diplomacy. The main neighbors of Israel are Egyptians, Syrians and those who live on the east bank of Jordan. This last group is a negligible force demographically, and the interests of the Syrians and Egyptians are widely divergent. Egypt's interests are to the south and west of its territory; the Sinai holds no attraction. Syria is always threatened from multiple directions, and alliance with Egypt adds little to its security. Therefore, under the worst of circumstances, Egypt and Syria have difficulty supporting each other. Under the best of circumstances, from Israel's point of view, it can reach a political accommodation with Egypt, securing its southwestern frontier politically as well as by geography, thus freeing Israel to concentrate on the northern threats and opportunities.

## Israel and the Great Powers

The threat to Israel rarely comes from the region, except when the Israelis are divided internally. The conquests of Israel occur when powers not adjacent to it begin forming empires. Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, Rome, Turkey and Britain all controlled Israel politically, sometimes for worse and sometimes for better. Each dominated it militarily, but none was a neighbor of Israel. This is a consistent pattern. Israel can resist its neighbors; danger arises when more distant powers begin playing imperial games. Empires can bring force to bear that Israel cannot resist.

Israel therefore has this problem: It would be secure if it could confine itself to protecting its interests from neighbors, but it cannot confine itself because its geographic location invariably draws larger, more distant powers toward Israel. Therefore, while Israel's military can focus only on immediate interests, its diplomatic interests must look much further. Israel is constantly entangled with global interests (as the globe is defined at any point), seeking to deflect and align with broader global powers. When it fails in this diplomacy, the consequences can be catastrophic.

Israel exists in three conditions. First, it can be a completely independent state. This condition occurs when there are no major imperial powers external to the region. We might call this the David model.

Second, it can live as part of an imperial system — either as a subordinate ally, as a moderately autonomous entity or as a satrapy. In any case, it maintains its identity but loses room for independent maneuvering in foreign policy and potentially in domestic policy. We might call this the Persian model in its most beneficent form.

Finally, Israel can be completely crushed — with mass deportations and migrations, with a complete loss of autonomy and minimal residual autonomy. We might call this the Babylonian model.

The Davidic model exists primarily when there is no external imperial power needing control of the Levant that is in a position either to send direct force or to support surrogates in the immediate region. The Persian model exists when Israel aligns itself with the foreign policy interests of such an imperial power, to its own benefit. The Babylonian model exists when Israel miscalculates on the broader balance of power and attempts to resist an emerging hegemon. When we look at Israeli behavior over time, the periods when Israel does not confront hegemonic powers outside the region are not rare, but are far less common than when it is confronting them.

Given the period of the first iteration of Israel, it would be too much to say that the Davidic model rarely comes into play, but certainly since that time, variations of the Persian and Babylonian models have dominated. The reason is geographic. Israel is normally of interest to outside powers because of its strategic position. While Israel can deal with local challenges effectively, it cannot deal with broader challenges. It lacks the economic or military weight to resist. Therefore, it is normally in the process of managing broader threats or collapsing because of them.

## The Geopolitics of Contemporary Israel

Let us then turn to the contemporary manifestation of Israel. Israel was recreated because of the interaction between a regional great power, the Ottoman Empire, and a global power, Great Britain. During its expansionary phase, the Ottoman Empire sought to dominate the eastern Mediterranean as well as both its northern and southern coasts. One thrust went through the Balkans toward central Europe. The other was toward Egypt. Inevitably, this required that the Ottomans secure the Levant.

For the British, the focus on the eastern Mediterranean was as the primary sea lane to India. As such, Gibraltar and the Suez were crucial. The importance of the Suez was such that the presence of a hostile, major naval force in the eastern Mediterranean represented a direct threat to British interests. It followed that defeating the Ottoman Empire during World War I and breaking its residual naval power was critical. The British, as was shown at Gallipoli, lacked the resources to break the Ottoman Empire by main force. They resorted to a series of alliances with local forces to undermine the Ottomans. One was an alliance with Bedouin tribes in the Arabian Peninsula; others involved covert agreements with anti-Turkish, Arab interests from the Levant to the Persian Gulf. A third, minor thrust was aligning with Jewish interests globally, particularly those interested in the refounding of Israel. Britain had little interest in this goal, but saw such discussions as part of the process of destabilizing the Ottomans.

The strategy worked. Under an agreement with France, the Ottoman province of Syria was divided into two parts on a line roughly running east-west between the sea and Mount Hermon. The northern part was given to France and divided into Lebanon and a rump Syria entity. The southern part was given to Britain and was called Palestine, after the Ottoman administrative district Filistina. Given the complex politics of the Arabian Peninsula, the British had to find a home for a group of Hashemites, which they located on the east bank of



the Jordan River and designated, for want of a better name, the Trans-Jordan — the other side of the Jordan. Palestine looked very much like traditional Israel.

The ideological foundations of Zionism are not our concern here, nor are the pre- and post-World War II migrations of Jews, although those are certainly critical. What is important for purposes of this analysis are two things: First, the British emerged economically and militarily crippled from World War II and unable to retain their global empire, Palestine included. Second, the two global powers that emerged after World War II — the United States and the Soviet Union — were engaged in an intense struggle for the eastern Mediterranean after World War II, as can be seen in the Greek and Turkish issues at that time. Neither wanted to see the British Empire survive, each wanted the Levant, and neither was prepared to make a decisive move to take it.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union saw the re-creation of Israel as an opportunity to introduce their power to the Levant. The Soviets thought they might have some influence over Israel due to ideology. The Americans thought they might have some influence given the role of American Jews in the founding. Neither was thinking particularly clearly about the matter, because neither had truly found its balance after World War II. Both knew the Levant was important, but neither saw the Levant as a central battleground at that moment. Israel slipped through the cracks.

Once the question of Jewish unity was settled through ruthless action by David Ben Gurion's government, Israel faced a simultaneous threat from all of its immediate neighbors. However, as we have seen, the threat in 1948 was more apparent than real. The northern Levant, Lebanon, was fundamentally disunited — far more interested in regional maritime trade and concerned about control from Damascus. It posed no real threat to Israel. Jordan, settling the eastern bank of the Jordan River, was an outside power that had been transplanted into the region and was more concerned about native Arabs — the Palestinians — than about Israel. The Jordanians secretly collaborated with Israel. Egypt did pose a threat, but its ability to maintain lines of supply across the Sinai was severely limited and its genuine interest in engaging and destroying Israel was more rhetorical than real. As usual, the Egyptians could not afford the level of effort needed to move into the Levant. Syria by itself had a very real interest in Israel's defeat, but by itself was incapable of decisive action.

The exterior lines of Israel's neighbors prevented effective, concerted action. Israel's interior lines permitted efficient deployment and redeployment of force. It was not obvious at the time, but in retrospect we can see that once Israel existed, was united and had even limited military force, its survival was guaranteed. That is, so long as no great power was opposed to its existence.

From its founding until the Camp David Accords re-established the Sinai as a buffer with Egypt, Israel's strategic problem was this: So long as Egypt was in the Sinai, Israel's national security requirements outstripped its military capabilities. It could not simultaneously field an army, maintain its civilian economy and produce all the weapons and supplies needed for war. Israel had to align itself with great powers who saw an opportunity to pursue other interests by arming Israel.



*David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister (Public domain)*



*Josef Stalin, first Secretary-General of the Soviet Union (Public domain)*



*Robert Schuman, French prime minister, 1948 (Public domain)*

Israel's first patron was the Soviet Union — through Czechoslovakia — which supplied weapons before and after 1948 in the hopes of using Israel to gain a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean. Israel, aware of the risks of losing autonomy, also moved into a relationship with a declining great power that was fighting to retain its empire: France. Struggling to hold onto Algeria and in constant tension with Arabs, France saw Israel as a natural ally. And apart from the operation against Suez in 1956, Israel saw in France a patron that was not in a position to reduce Israeli autonomy. However, with the end of the Algerian war and the realignment of France in the Arab world, Israel became a liability to France and, after 1967, Israel lost French patronage.

Israel did not become a serious ally of the Americans until after 1967. Such an alliance was in the American interest. The United States had, as a strategic imperative, the goal of keeping the Soviet navy out of the Mediterranean or, at least, blocking its unfettered access. That meant that Turkey, controlling the Bosphorus, had to be kept in the American bloc. Syria and Iraq shifted policies in the late 1950s and by the mid-1960s had been armed by the Soviets. This made Turkey's position precarious: If the Soviets pressed from the north while Syria and

Iraq pressed from the south, the outcome would be uncertain, to say the least, and the global balance of power was at stake.

The United States used Iran to divert Iraq's attention. Israel was equally useful in diverting Syria's attention. So long as Israel threatened Syria from the south, it could not divert its forces to the north. That helped secure Turkey at a relatively low cost in aid and risk. By aligning itself with the interests of a great power, Israel lost some of its room for maneuver: For example, in 1973, it was limited by the United States in what it could do to Egypt. But those limitations aside, it remained autonomous internally and generally free to pursue its strategic interests.



*Celebrating the Camp David Accords, September 1978: Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, U.S. President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat (Source: Bill Fitz-Patrick, public domain)*

The end of hostilities with Egypt, guaranteed by the Sinai buffer zone, created a new era for Israel. Egypt was restored to its traditional position, Jordan was a marginal power on the east bank, Lebanon was in its normal, unstable mode, and only Syria was a threat. However, it was a threat that Israel could easily deal with. Syria by itself could not threaten the survival of Israel.

Following Camp David (an ironic name), Israel

was in its Davidic model, in a somewhat modified sense. Its survival was not at stake. Its problems — the domination of a large, hostile population and managing events in the northern Levant — were subcritical (meaning that, though these were not easy tasks, they did not represent fundamental threats to national survival, so long as Israel retained national unity). When unified, Israel has never been threatened by its neighbors. Geography dictates against it.



Israel's danger will come only if a great power seeks to dominate the Mediterranean Basin or to occupy the region between Afghanistan and the Mediterranean. In the short period since the fall of the Soviet Union, this has been impossible. There has been no great power with the appetite and the will for such an adventure. But 15 years is not even a generation, and Israel must measure its history in centuries.

It is the nature of the international system to seek balance. The primary reality of the world today is the overwhelming power of the United States. The United States makes few demands on Israel that matter. However, it is the nature of things that the United States threatens the interests of other great powers who, individually weak, will try to form coalitions against it. Inevitably, such coalitions will arise. That will be the next point of danger for Israel.



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses a joint session of the U.S. Congress in March 2015 — warning of dangers to Israel if Washington reaches an accord with Iran. (Public domain)*

In the event of a global rivalry, the United States might place onerous requirements on Israel. Alternatively, great powers might move into the Jordan River valley or ally with Syria, move into Lebanon or ally with Israel. The historical attraction of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean would focus the attention of such a power and lead to attempts to assert control over the Mediterranean or

create a secure Middle Eastern empire. In either event, or some of the others discussed, it would create a circumstance in which Israel might face a Babylonian catastrophe or be forced into some variation of Persian or Roman subjugation.

Israel's danger is not a Palestinian rising. Palestinian agitation is an irritant that Israel can manage so long as it does not undermine Israeli unity. Whether it is managed by domination or by granting the Palestinians a vassal state matters little. Nor can Israel be threatened by its neighbors. Even a unified attack by Syria and Egypt would fail, for the reasons discussed. Israel's real threat, as can be seen in history, lies in the event of internal division and/or a great power, coveting Israel's geographical position, marshaling force that is beyond its capacity to resist. Even that can be managed if Israel has a patron whose interests involve denying the coast to another power.

Israel's reality is this. It is a small country, yet must manage threats arising far outside of its region. It can survive only if it maneuvers with great powers commanding enormously greater resources. Israel cannot match the resources and, therefore, it must be constantly clever. There are periods when it is relatively safe because of great power alignments, but its normal condition is one of global unease. No nation can be clever forever, and Israel's history shows that some form of subordination is inevitable. Indeed, it is to a very limited extent subordinate to the United States now.

For Israel, the retention of a Davidic independence is difficult. Israel's strategy must be to manage its subordination effectively by dealing with its patron cleverly, as it did with Persia. But cleverness is not a geopolitical concept. It is not permanent, and it is not assured. And that is the perpetual crisis of Jerusalem.

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