

DESPITE FIERY RAGE THAT HAS TURNED ISRAEL INTO A NEAR-PARIAH

Israel insists it's emerged from Gaza fight with diplomatic ties largely intact

A clear pro-Israel bloc in Europe stood firm, Jerusalem argues, while Arab states that have no interest in seeing Hamas get stronger maintained their peace with Israel

By **LAZAR BERMAN** ✓

26 May 2021, 1:50 am



Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi visits a Petah Tikva building hit by Hamas rocket fire with his Czech and Slovak counterparts on May 20, 2021. (Shlomi Amsalem, Foreign Ministry)

Israel was riding high.

Countries around the world saw the Jewish state as an example to follow due to its successful national vaccination campaign, and Jerusalem even began sending its extra doses to allied states as part of a diplomatic campaign.

Israel's envoys and civil society were beginning to build off normalization agreements with Arab countries as Israeli citizens and officials alike dreamt of a new position in the Middle East. No longer would Israel's relations with the Arab world be dominated by the intractable Palestinian issue. More and more Arab countries would see that the security, technological and economic benefits of ties with the Jewish state far outweighed any stale public sympathy for the Palestinian cause.



There was even optimism about relations between Jews and Arabs within Israel. Government ministries had worked closely and effectively with Arab communities to combat the coronavirus. The coordination extended to the Israel Defense Forces's Home Front Command, a rare instance of positive cooperation between Palestinians in East Jerusalem and uniformed Israeli officers.

Then the entire edifice of international admiration, regional integration, and domestic ministration crumbled, revealing seething anger toward Israel and Jews as violence spread across Jerusalem and beyond.



An Israeli student receives a COVID-19 vaccine injection in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba, March 17, 2021. (Flash90)

As the unrest swiftly escalated to all out war with Hamas, the fourth major conflict with Gaza since 2008, Israel found itself back where it did not want to be: the focus of violent protests and vociferous castigation in Europe and across the Muslim world.

Countries decried Israel's ostensibly heavy-handed campaign against Hamas rocket fire, with some accusing Israel of war crimes. In the US, popular talk show hosts and celebrities joined the discourse.

Once again, a conflict Israel insists it did not seek nor initiate has turned it into a near-pariah on the world stage. In Europe and the US, moreover, criticism of Israel has escalated into spikes of antisemitic incidents.



Rockets are launched toward Israel from Gaza City, controlled by the Palestinian Hamas terror group, on May 18, 2021. (Photo by MAHMUD HAMS / AFP)

Israeli officials say the country is not alone, however, and argue that many international allies stood by its side, including Arab states that only recently normalized relations. Experts warn, though, that another longer conflict could risk some relationships or harm those still in the process of being forged, and that Israel has work to do to patch up its ties with others.

Despite the fiery anti-Israel rage in European capitals and elsewhere, Jerusalem insists that the international reaction to Operation Guardian of the Walls in the places that matter shows the effectiveness of its diplomatic efforts.

“In the places where international public opinion is made, among the members of the UN Security Council... in the US, the entire American political realm, members of Congress, in the Administration, and in Europe, we are seeing definite movement toward far greater echoing of Israel’s messages,” a senior Foreign Ministry official said.

“The connection with the US administration, the good relationship and long-standing alliance, proved itself,” argued Foreign Ministry spokesman Lior Hayat. “The Americans stood by our side during the entire operation. They supported the Israeli position and assisted us in international fora.”

A tale of two Europes

As much as the European Union seeks to project a united front, there are distinct blocs whose differing worldviews manifest in their relationship with Israel.

On Thursday, the foreign ministers of Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia visited Israel during the fighting. They toured sites hit by rockets from Gaza, met ministers and declared in no uncertain terms that their presence was a show of solidarity.

“Israel has the right to defend itself,” German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas declared on the tarmac upon arrival.

“I am speechless after I witnessed the destruction and terror that Israel has experienced,” Czech Foreign Minister said Jakub Kulhanek after touring a building devastated by a rocket in Petah Tikva.

In another unmistakable show of support, the Israeli flag flew on official buildings in the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovenia during the operation in a sign of “solidarity” with the Jewish state, officials said.



Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi (L) greets German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (R) at Ben Gurion Airport, May 20, 2021 (Miri Shimonovitch)



The Austrian Federal Chancellery raised the Israeli flag as a sign of solidarity, in Vienna on May 14, 2021. (HELMUT FOHRINGER / APA / AFP)

“I condemn with the utmost firmness the attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip,” Austria’s conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said in a statement sent to AFP.

“Israel has the right to defend itself against these attacks. To show our solidarity ... we have put up the Israeli flag,” on the chancellery and the foreign ministry, the statement added.

Hungary, which has carved out a nationalist foreign policy that rejects what it sees as pan-European post-nationalism, showed it was more than willing to go out on a limb for Israel.

It was the sole European Union country to veto a statement last Tuesday from EU foreign ministers that called for an immediate ceasefire among “unacceptable” civilian casualties.

Hungary objected to the way in which the text treated both sides equally, diplomatic sources with knowledge of the discussions told The Times of Israel, adding that although the statement mentioned Israel’s right to self-defense, Hungary felt it curtailed that right by calling for an immediate ceasefire.

Diplomatic sources said that Hungary’s objections were not taken into consideration, leading Budapest to veto the statement. Other central European nations also voiced objections, especially over the order of the articles in the statement, but did not threaten to veto.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (C) visits the Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City on July 20, 2018. (AFP PHOTO / MENAHEM KAHANA)

For some of the European countries, the defense of Israel in the face of less supportive capitals elsewhere on the continent was nothing new. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has for years cultivated a pro-Israel bloc within the European Union, made up mostly of Central and Eastern European countries who act as a bulwark against attempts to push what Jerusalem views as an anti-Israel line in Brussels.

“I think it once again confirmed the West-East divide,” said Emmanuel Navon, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and at the Kohelet Policy Forum. “Israel’s strongest allies are mostly the [Visegrad Group](#) — Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia — and also Germany, even though it doesn’t belong to this group.”

According to Navon, “the pro-Israel group in Europe is growing.”

Austria is an example of a country that has adopted a new, sympathetic approach to Israel. For most of its history, Austria was openly critical of Israel. Chancellor Kurz led the pivot when he assumed office in December 2017, and has maintained Vienna’s supportive stance.

“Nothing justifies the more than 1,000 rockets that Hamas and other terrorist groups have fired up to now at Israel from Gaza,” said Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg during the fighting. “We strongly support the security of

Israel.”

In 2014, there was no Central European bloc that had Israel’s back. Since then, Navon argued, fears stemming from Islamist terror visited on the continent had sparked a wave of support for right-wing populists, who are more likely to back Israel.

“Many European countries and leaders do identify today more closely with Israel. I think they do understand Israel’s plight better,” Navon said.

A Foreign Ministry official singled out Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Greece in the European pro-Israel bloc, though other central and eastern European states have also been increasingly supportive in recent years.

Germany belongs in its own category. Israel and Germany maintain a special relationship due to the Holocaust, and Berlin takes that responsibility seriously. During the fighting, leading German politicians from a range of political parties joined a solidarity rally in Berlin to show support for Israel and to oppose antisemitism.



Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg speaks with the media as he arrives for a meeting of EU foreign ministers at the Europa building in Brussels, January 20, 2020 (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the parliament Bundestag, in Berlin, Germany, December 16, 2020. (Markus Schreiber/AP)

With Germany heading for elections in September, and the center-left Green Party polling neck-and-neck with the ruling Christian Democratic Union, Berlin’s foreign policy may soon shift.

Israel has a keen interest in Germany, given the outsized role the country plays in the European Union. The importance of Berlin has only grown with Britain’s decision to decamp from the bloc.

No matter who wins, an overriding German concern will be maintaining at least the impression of European unity on key issues, which will limit the extent to which it can support Israel.

France, the other leading EU power, sent mixed messages throughout the fighting. Asked about the conflict last week, French Prime Minister Jean Castex focused primarily on the plight of Palestinian civilians without mentioning Hamas or rocket fire.



French Prime Minister Jean Castex delivers a speech during a ceremony in Nice, on November 7, 2020, in homage to the three victims of an attack at Notre-Dame de Nice Basilica on October 29, 2020 (Valéry HACHE / various sources / AFP)

“It was really shocking,” said Navon.

France also [pushed a UN Security Council resolution](#) calling for an immediate ceasefire, which reportedly did not make mention of Hamas rocket fire.

And on Sunday, France’s Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian [warned](#) of the risk of “long-lasting apartheid” in Israel in the event that the Palestinians fail to obtain their own state.

Days earlier, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi had praised his French counterpart for issuing a statement condemning rocket fire on Israel. “These strikes, carried out in violation of international law and for which responsibility has been claimed by Hamas, are unacceptable,” the French statement read.

On Tuesday, meanwhile, Ireland’s government [backed](#) a parliamentary motion that condemned Israel’s “de facto annexation” of Palestinian land — in what it said was the first use of such terminology by a European Union government in relation to Israel. Still, Ireland also condemned Hamas and other rocket fire: “The acts of terror by Hamas and other militant groups in firing rockets indiscriminately into Israel... cannot and should not ever be justified,” Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said.

The UK was also criticized for statements that appeared to balance condemnation of Hamas rocket fire and Israeli military strikes. London’s [expressions of grave concern](#) over the damage caused to hospitals, schools and homes in Gaza — as well as thinly veiled criticism of Israel for “violence against peaceful worshippers” and overt criticism of Israel’s settlement policies — were outstripped by the opposition Labour Party, which took an even harsher line against Israel.

“Many British Jews feel that the government’s support for Israel has been halfhearted at best,” said Jake Wallis Simons, deputy editor of the Jewish Chronicle and a writer at The Spectator, while acknowledging the support offered by 10 Downing for the Jewish community following antisemitic incidents.

“An outcome that many in the community desire would be for the British government to proscribe Hamas in its entirety, not just its military wing,” Wallis Simons said. “Although there have been positive noises on this in principle from Downing Street, whether it translates into real action remains to be seen.”



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson at a press conference inside 10 Downing Street in central London on December 24, 2020. (Paul GROVER / POOL / AFP)

The agreements held

The countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations, plus those that cooperate quietly with Israel like Saudi Arabia, criticized Israel harshly when the unrest was limited to Jerusalem and focused on the al-Aqsa Mosque, one of Islam’s holiest sites.

Once the violence spread to Gaza and shifted into a fight between Israel and Hamas, their tone changed.

“It was quite striking,” said Sarah Feuer, a fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv. “Their statements were quite restrained and even-handed, and you saw in a number of their media outlets pretty clear criticism of Hamas.”



Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat speaks to the press at the royal palace in Rabat, Morocco, December 22, 2020. (Judah Ari Gross/Times of Israel)

Significantly, none of the countries with diplomats in Israel — Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, or Morocco — recalled their envoys in protest.

Still, interactions between civil society organizations did slow down during the escalation. A planned event between the INSS and a UAE think tank was delayed at the request of the Emiratis. Events between Israeli and Moroccan business organizations were also canceled. And the prime minister of Morocco reportedly sent a personal [message](#) to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh congratulating him on his “victory” over the “Zionist entity.”

“My sense is that as long as we don’t head into another round, these agreements have held,” said Feuer.

The UAE attempted to maintain a balanced position, issuing low-profile statements calling on Israel to suspend its operation while maintaining channels of communications with the Israelis.

The 11-day fight won’t change the UAE’s and Bahrain’s calculations, explained Ibrahim al-Assil, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Middle East Institute. But the ties are not iron-clad.

“What could change or complicate them is a prolonged confrontation in the future, or if the Israeli government keeps sliding towards the right,” al-Assil cautioned. “The composition of the next Israeli government and their policies toward the Palestinians will be as significant as the war itself in shaping potential scenarios for the future of the Abraham Accords.”

Jordan, which has been in a years-long [spat with Netanyahu](#) that escalated in the months before the Gaza conflict, was especially critical of Israel in the early days of the tensions.

“What the Israeli police and special forces are doing, from violations against the mosque to attacks on worshippers, is barbaric [behavior] that is rejected and condemned,” Amman said in a statement, summoning Israel’s chargé d’affaires in Jordan to decry Israel’s “attacks on worshippers.”



Members of Jordan's parliament rise to honor a Palestinian terrorist, March 24, 2019. (Screenshot: Twitter)

Last week, Jordanian lawmakers unanimously called on the government to expel the Israeli ambassador in Amman and recall the Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv, though the motion was merely symbolic.

Subsequent statements from senior Jordanian leaders were less strident regarding the conflict with Hamas. Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi tweeted that the recent escalation “shows dire need for effective effort to restore political horizons to end occupation, achieve peace on basis of 2-state solution. Occupation is root cause of conflict.” King Abdullah tweeted a request asking God to accept Muslims’ fasting and prayers as Ramadan ends and to remember Palestinians and Jerusalem.

The Jordanian population — half of which is Palestinian — was vocal in its opposition to Israel, but demonstrations were fairly tame. Responding to a call by the Muslim Brotherhood, [some 10,000 people gathered](#) in the Sweimeh region near the border with the West Bank. Demonstrators carried banners reading: “Jerusalem is the symbol of victory,” “Congratulations on the victory of the resistance” and “The resilience of Gaza led to victory.” In Karameh, another few thousand demonstrators — many of them youth dressed in Jordanian and Palestinian keffiyeh scarves — burned Israeli flags and chanted slogans against the peace deal.

With the economy hit hard by COVID-19 restrictions and political rivalries within the royal family spilling into the public eye recently, “this may have been a bit of a valve for people to unleash their frustration, and the government saw an interest in letting that happen given the domestic pressures that Jordan has been under lately,” said Feuer.

“Whatever the reason, it was worrying, and it’s something that adds to this pile of evidence that Israel is really going to have to try and repair their relationship with Jordan as soon possible,” she added.

Predictably, countries that have been hostile to Israel in recent years, especially Turkey and Qatar, were far more adversarial in their statements. In a phone call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani [stressed](#) “the need for urgent action by the international community to stop the repeated brutal Israeli attacks against civilians in Gaza and the blessed al-Aqsa Mosque.”

In comments that were condemned by the US as antisemitic, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, “They are murderers, to the point that they kill children who are five or six years old. They are murderers, to the point they drag women on the ground to their death, and they are murderers, to the point that they kill old people... They only are satisfied by sucking their blood.”

Turkey’s rival Egypt came out as a major beneficiary from the unrest, displaying its value as a mediator with access to the key players — Israel, Hamas and the US. The Israeli embassy in Cairo expressed its “thanks and appreciation” for President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s leadership in crafting a ceasefire on the embassy’s Facebook page.



Supporters of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood protest in the village of Sweimeh, near the Jordanian border with the West Bank, on May 21, 2021. (Khalil MAZRAAWI / AFP)



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi speaks during a press conference in Paris on December 7, 2020 (Michel Euler / POOL / AFP)

“Egypt showed again that it is an extremely significant and responsible player,” said an Israeli official to The Times of Israel.

Sissi also pledged \$500 million to help reconstruction efforts in Gaza, and opened the Rafah crossing to accept wounded Palestinians for treatment in Egyptian hospitals, possibly signifying a desire to take a leading role in the rebuilding of Gaza. Egypt is wary of pressure from the Biden administration on its human rights record, and this might be a way of deflecting some of that pressure.

“Generally speaking, I think it is in Israel’s interest to see Egypt play a more substantial role than Qatar, but it’s not really clear what in the longer term a greater Egyptian involvement will mean, and if it’s even feasible,” Feuer noted.

Not all messages coming out of Egypt were encouraging, however. Two senior Al-Azhar clerics blasted Israel in their state-sanctioned sermons, using language that could have come from the Muslim Brotherhood. Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the foremost institutional Sunni authority as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt, called Israeli actions “brutal Zionist terror under a shameful global silence,” and called on the Al-Azhar community to “join the oppressed Palestinian people in the face of the tyranny of the Zionist entity.”

A reminder of the headaches

Israeli sources said that they do not think the operation hurt ties with the Arab world.

However, the fighting could have deterred countries who were on the fence about establishing ties with Israel — such as Saudi Arabia and Oman — from doing so in the short term.

“It’s a reminder of the headaches,” said Feuer.

“In the long run, it will matter a little but not too much with the Arab world,” said Daniel Byman, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution’s Center for Middle East Policy. “It’s a reminder to Arab leaders that Israel is unpopular and that peace and any public closeness to Israel carries a cost. But it’s not a crazy high cost — things didn’t get out of control. So if you’re them, worry a little, but not overwhelmingly.”

The latest round of fighting will not stop the larger trends driving policy choices in the Middle East.

“The conflict is taking a new regional dimension with Iran trying to ride the popular wave, co-opt the Palestinian grievances, cultivate its support to Hamas and push them to reconnect with the Assad regime in Syria to boost the Iranian-backed regional network,” said al-Assil. “That could drive the UAE and Israel even closer. Abu Dhabi wants to counter the Iranian, Turkish and Qatari influence in the region, and they still see the alliance with Israel as a cornerstone to achieve that.”

In addition, as the region settles back into its pre-existing camps, and the rebuilding program for Gaza begins to take shape, Israel should identify how it can leverage common apathy toward Hamas and desire for new US-guaranteed stability arrangements.

“There is potentially an opportunity here to try and enlist their involvement in whatever sort of arrangement happens now,” Feuer noted. “Most of these places have no interest in seeing Hamas involvement.”



Daniel Byman (Courtesy Georgetown University)