



# ISRAEL

## Quick Facts

Population: 8,675,475 (includes populations of the Golan Heights or Golan Sub-District and also East Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel after 1967) (July 2020 est.)

Area: 21,937 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Jewish 74.4% (of which Israel-born 76.9%, Europe/America/Oceania-born 15.9%, Africa-born 4.6%, Asia-born 2.6%), Arab 20.9%, other 4.7% (2018 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$350.7 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Although there was a strong Islamist current in the Palestinian national movement of the British Mandate Period, the Israeli War of Independence (1947–49) and subsequent policies adopted by the Israeli government kept Islamism largely at bay until the 1970s. Islamism regained popularity in the wake of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, spreading to the Palestinian Territories and even into Israel itself as Israeli Arabs over time have shown increasing identification with their Palestinian cousins in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israeli preoccupation with secular Arab nationalist groups in the 1970s and 80s enabled Islamism to metastasize unfettered. In recent years, the phenomenon is manifested most concretely in the Islamic Movement of Israel. Today, the lack of strong governmental oversight in the Sinai Peninsula has led to militant Islamist infiltration of the area and poses significant threats to Israeli national security.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

### *Hamas*

The Islamist group known by the acronym HAMAS (“the Islamic resistance movement” in Arabic) is the premier Islamist faction in the Palestinian Territories, and the principal extremist threat to the state of Israel. Its precursor was an Islamist group known as Mujama al-Islamiya. In the 1970s, over the objections of moderate Palestinians,<sup>1</sup> the Israeli government permitted Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip, to register Mujama al-Islamiya first as a charity and then, in 1979, as an association.<sup>2</sup> At first, the group devoted itself primarily to building schools, clinics, and libraries. Mujama al-Islamiya refrained from anti-Israel violence in its early years, but when the First Intifada erupted in December 1987, Yassin and some of his Mujama al-Islamiya colleagues founded Hamas. Hamas promotes fundamentalist Islamic norms, such as requiring women to wear the *hijab* and permitting polygamous

unions. Furthermore, Hamas has committed itself to waging an armed struggle to obliterate Israel and to establish an Islamic state governed by *sharia* law “from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.”<sup>3</sup> To that end, Hamas has engineered dozens of suicide bombings that killed hundreds of Israelis. Hamas carried out almost 40 percent of suicide attacks during the Second Intifada (2000-2005), far more than any other group.<sup>4</sup>

Hamas, despite being a Sunni movement, benefits significantly from Iranian support. Iran has provided military assistance to Hamas since the early 1990s. It has also provided both rhetorical and logistical support to the group in its operations. In a now-infamous 2002 incident, Israel captured the *Karine A*, a ship destined for the Gaza Strip and carrying 50 tons of advanced weaponry on board. The ship had been stocked in Iranian waters.<sup>5</sup> Iran has also provided substantial financial aid to Hamas. In December 2006, Hamas reported on its website that Iran had provided the organization with \$250 million.<sup>6</sup> After Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009, Iran provided Hamas with a variety of weapons, including Grad rockets with range of 20–40 km, anti-tank missiles and others. Along with the military aid, Iran has provided advanced training for Hamas operatives with instructors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, as well as propaganda support.<sup>7</sup>

The Syrian civil war initially proved detrimental to the relationship between Hamas and Iran. Hamas refused to support Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, one of Iran’s key allies.<sup>8</sup> In response, Tehran cut off Hamas’s funding, which amounted at that time to about \$23 million per month.<sup>9</sup> This move forced Hamas to seek out alternative sources of funding, including from wealthy Sunni states such as Qatar<sup>10</sup> and Saudi Arabia. However, Hamas and Iran eventually reconciled, and in 2015 Iran began supplying Hamas anew with military technology, helping it repair tunnels destroyed in the 2014 conflict with Israel, and hosting Hamas delegations in Iran.<sup>11</sup>

Like many militant groups, Hamas has secured popular support among Palestinians and pursued recruitment through community service and engagement. Hamas provides schools, hospitals, and other necessary social services. Hamas guarantees to the family of its suicide bombers economic assistance, including education, healthcare, and funeral expenses. This financial support—especially in impoverished communities—serves as a continuing recruitment driver.<sup>12</sup>

Though Hamas is more active and powerful in Palestinian communities, Israeli Arabs have also been involved with the organization. In May 2011, the Haifa District Court sentenced an Israeli Arab to five years in prison for conspiring with his brother-in-law to gather an arms cache in Israel for Hamas.<sup>13</sup> The same year, Israeli authorities arrested two Arab residents of East Jerusalem holding Israeli citizenship who were planning to attack Jerusalem’s Teddy Stadium during a Premier League soccer match. Authorities divulged that the two men had longstanding ties with Hamas.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of international pressure, Hamas cosmetically modified its charter in 2017 to make it appear more moderate. The amended charter still refuses to relinquish the claim to every part of British Mandate Palestine. However, it acknowledges “the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Islamic Movement in Israel*

The Islamic Movement in Israel is a Sunni group founded by Abdullah Darwish that advocates for the vital role of Islam in public life in Israel. Much like Hamas, the Islamic Movement courts favor from local populations through providing social services. During the First Intifada, the Islamic Movement established the Islamic Relief Committee, the stated purpose of which was to provide assistance to injured Palestinians. In 1993, the Islamic Movement split in response to internal discord over the Oslo Accords. Darwish supported accepting the Accords, while more hardline members, such as Sheikh Ra’ed Salah and Sheikh Kemal Khatib, did not. The hardline faction became known as the Northern Branch (as the majority of its leaders came from northern Israel).<sup>16</sup> Darwish led the more moderate Southern Branch.

The Northern Branch played a part in inciting the Second Intifada in 2000. Specifically, incitement by the group helped instigate clashes between Israeli Arabs and police in the Wadi Ara region in October 2000—clashes that left 13 protesters dead.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the Islamic Movement's support within Israel comes from the Bedouin community (discussed further below). In November 2015, the Israeli government designated the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement and its 17 affiliated charities as illegal, and jailed its leader, Ra'ed Salah. To circumvent the ban, members of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement founded a new group, the Trust and Reform Party, in 2016. The head of the party, Husam Abu Leil, was the second deputy head of the Islamic Movement's Northern Branch.<sup>18</sup>

The group has sporadically reasserted its presence in Israeli politics and shown signs of life. In November 2016, for instance, Israel's internal security service, the Shin Bet, arrested two Israeli Arabs who were planning an attack on Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) troops in retaliation for the Northern Branch's proscription.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, in 2018, nine people were convicted of being affiliated with a banned terrorist movement and conspiracy to commit a crime after they admitted their association with the Islamic Movement's northern branch.<sup>20</sup>

### *Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)*

Palestinian Islamic Jihad emerged in Gaza in 1981 as a fusion of the Islamism advocated by Omar Abdel-Rahman, the spiritual leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, with Palestinian nationalism. Its founders included Fathi Shaqaqi and Abd al-Aziz al-Awda, who were affiliated with the Egyptian Islamic Jihad until their expulsion from Egypt after President Anwar Sadat's assassination,<sup>21</sup> as well as several members of the secular Popular Liberation Forces. PIJ quickly became one of the most violent Palestinian factions, assassinating the commander of the Israeli military police in the Gaza Strip in August 1987 and launching a wave of suicide bombings.<sup>22</sup>

Israel deported Shaqaqi and al-Awda to southern Lebanon in 1988, and in 1989 Shaqaqi decided to relocate the organization's official command to Damascus.<sup>23</sup> According to the U.S. State Department, PIJ's high-ranking leadership is located in Syria while some leaders live in Lebanon, though most of its affiliates live in Gaza.<sup>24</sup> After the Mossad killed Shaqaqi in 1995, Ramadan Shallah, previously a professor at the University of South Florida, became head of the organization.<sup>25</sup> In recent years, Shallah was sidelined by chronic illness, and his deputy, Ziad al-Nakhalah, has served as the group's leader since 2018. Shallah died in June of 2020.<sup>26</sup>

PIJ is much smaller than Hamas and, according to IDF estimates, consists of around 15,000 members.<sup>27</sup> Like Hamas, it is ardently committed to the violent destruction of Israel,<sup>29</sup> but unlike Hamas spends little time on social services for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, where it is active today. The organization's armed wing is called the al-Quds Brigades and, despite its small size, was responsible for more than a quarter of the suicide bombings during the Second Intifada.<sup>30</sup> In recent years, the organization has intensified its firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Though the group is Sunni, PIJ is nonetheless strongly influenced by the model of Islamic political activism embodied by Iran's 1979 Revolution.<sup>32</sup> As a result, Iran has historically provided extensive support to the group via funding, as well as military equipment and training. In 1998, it was revealed that Iran had allocated \$2 million to PIJ's annual budget. Since then, the Iranian support to PIJ has been much higher. In 2013, PIJ sources stated that they received from Iran around \$3 million per month.<sup>33</sup> According to Ali Nourizadeh, director of the Center for Iranian Studies in London, Iran at the time was transferring to the organization \$100–150 million every year.<sup>34</sup> However, in 2015, tensions between the group and Iran began to appear, due to PIJ's refusal to condemn the Sunni Gulf state attacks, led by Saudi Arabia, against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.<sup>35</sup> In 2015, a senior PIJ leader acknowledged that the organization was suffering from the worst financial catastrophe since its founding as a result of Iran curtailing its financial support.<sup>36</sup> According to various reports in 2016, Iran cut its support for the organization by 90 percent.<sup>37</sup> In

2018, reports estimated that PIJ receives 30 million dollars a year from Iran. This figure appears to have remained static over the past two years.<sup>38</sup>

### *Hezbollah*

Hezbollah is a Shia Muslim militia that engages in terrorist activity while maintaining a robust political/social-welfare wing.<sup>39</sup> The organization was founded in 1982 during the Lebanese Civil War with significant support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>40</sup> In its founding statement,<sup>41</sup> Hezbollah professed its loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; called for the establishment of an Islamic regime; and demanded the removal of the United States, France, and Israel from Lebanon, in addition to the annihilation of Israel.<sup>42</sup> Iran regards Hezbollah as a proxy and vehicle for spreading its influence through the region. The Islamic Republic provides extensive financial support, training, and advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. In total, Iran's support is estimated at between 700 to 800 million dollars per year, including weaponry, training, and logistical support.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Iran funds Hezbollah's television channel *Al-Manar*, providing approximately \$15 million annually.<sup>44</sup>

Hezbollah coalesced following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to oust the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Soon after the PLO evacuated Beirut for Tunis, Shia militias began attacking the IDF. Hezbollah was formed through the amalgamation of some of the aforementioned Shia militias and launched a guerilla war to expel the IDF from Lebanon. In 1985, the IDF withdrew to the "security belt" in southern Lebanon, where it proceeded to fight a 15-year war against Hezbollah. Then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak attempted to alter this equation in 2000 by removing Israel's remaining forces from Lebanon following Israel's withdrawal. However, Hezbollah quickly became the dominant political force in the country.<sup>45</sup> Hezbollah officially entered politics in the 1992 parliamentary elections and has continued to grow in influence and power since, to the point that it is now represented in the Lebanese cabinet.

According to Israeli Security Agency (ISA) assessments, following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah began to focus on penetrating the Israeli Arab population. Hezbollah sees Israeli Arabs as valuable operatives because they have the advantage of being Israeli citizens who enjoy freedom of movement and accessibility to targets.<sup>46</sup> While the majority of its activities are affiliated with Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hezbollah also cooperates with Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).<sup>47</sup> Hezbollah uses its international presence to recruit Israeli Arabs when they travel outside of Israel.<sup>48</sup>

Hezbollah is known for its cross-border operations in addition to extensive terrorist activities abroad, such as attacks in Argentina targeting the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the Jewish community center there, in 1992 and 1994, respectively,<sup>49</sup> as well as an attack against a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, in 2012. Hezbollah maintains a large presence of supporters and operatives all around the world, including North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.<sup>50</sup> Some of the attacks carried out by the organization were initiated and directed by Iran, such as the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the attacks in Argentina.<sup>51</sup>

After Hezbollah operatives killed eight Israeli soldiers and captured two more in 2006, Israel and Hezbollah descended into a 33-day war.<sup>52</sup> During the conflict, Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israel.<sup>53</sup> Although the war ended in a stalemate,<sup>54</sup> given Israel's overwhelming military advantage, Hezbollah could portray the outcome as a victory. Since 2006, the northern border has seen relatively little terrorist activity.<sup>55</sup> In February 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened to attack Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona and has previously threatened to attack ammonia supplies in Haifa.<sup>56</sup>

Along with Iran, Syria has historically been a key supporter of Hezbollah. When the Arab Spring threatened the stability of the Assad dictatorship, both Iran and Hezbollah intervened to support the regime. Nearly a decade on, Iran (and Hezbollah's) help has been instrumental in turning the tide of the conflict away from the Assad regime's domestic opposition, and back toward Damascus. In turn, as Assad and his allies have consolidated power, Israeli fears have grown that the country could become more vulnerable

to Hezbollah terrorism.<sup>57</sup> This has come at a high cost, however. At the peak of its commitment to Syria's war, Hezbollah dedicated 40% (some 8,000 fighters) of its personnel and capabilities to Syrian battlefields in 2018, according to IDF assessments.<sup>58</sup> Hezbollah sustained some 2,000 casualties and 10,000 injuries by 2018, according to those same assessments.

Over the past two and a half years, Israel's campaign to target Hezbollah forces and Iranian entrenchment in Syria has continued full steam. Former IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot confirmed in 2019 that Israel struck thousands of targets in Syria, some of which, it is safe to assume, involved Hezbollah's own attempts to create an offensive and terrorist infrastructure in Syria.<sup>59</sup> Israel's campaign has also targeted the Iranian-Hezbollah program to assemble and deploy precision guided missiles across Lebanon.<sup>60</sup>

### *Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*

Israel has more often been a rhetorical target of al-Qaeda than an actual one.<sup>61</sup> In almost every one of his public statements between 1990 and 2011, Osama bin Laden referenced the Palestinian issue. A 2001 Treasury Department report reveals that the group's Iraqi *emir*, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had received more than \$35,000 for training Jordanian and Palestinian operatives in Afghanistan and enabling their travel to the Levant with assurances that he would receive more funding for attacks against Israel.<sup>62</sup> However, nothing came of these attacks and "al Qaeda's plotting against Israel has never matched its anti-Israel propaganda."<sup>63</sup>

However, there have been some exceptions. In 2010, four Israeli Arabs were among those charged by Israeli authorities with establishing a terror cell and killing a taxi driver.<sup>64</sup> Two of the plaintiffs had trained at an al-Qaeda camp in Somalia.<sup>65</sup> Subsequently, in January 2014, Israeli officials revealed an al-Qaeda plot in Israel with a direct involvement of senior leaders of the organization. According to the reports, an al-Qaeda operative in Gaza run by Zawahiri recruited three men (two from East Jerusalem and one from the West Bank) through Skype and Facebook. All four operators were arrested.<sup>66</sup>

More recently, the Islamic State (ISIS) has likewise emerged as a threat to Israeli security. An offshoot of al-Qaeda,<sup>67</sup> in 2014 ISIS managed to occupy vast areas in the region of Iraq and Syria and to take control over the population in its territory. However, American and European airstrikes completely cleared ISIS from Iraq while reducing its domain in Syria to less than 5% of the nation's territory,<sup>68</sup> forcing the organization to expand into secondary territories, such as in Libya and the Sinai.<sup>69</sup>

The affiliate that proves most dangerous for Israel is the Sinai Province of the Islamic State, formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. The organization is located in the Sheikh Zweid area in the northern Sinai Peninsula, near the border with Israel,<sup>70</sup> and commands approximately 1,500 members.<sup>71</sup> The group pledged allegiance to ISIS on November 2014 with an emphasis on the importance of fighting the Jews:

After decades... Allah ordered the flag of jihad to be raised in our land and gave us the honor of being the soldiers [Allah] chose to fight the nation's most bitter enemies... the Jews... Our swords will be extended against them until Allah is victorious.<sup>72</sup>

The Sinai Province affiliate has launched several attacks against Israel over the past few years, including a combined attack that was carried out against a bus in Eilat in August 2011, several rocket attacks on Eilat, and attacks against the gas pipeline between Egypt and Israel in north Sinai.<sup>73</sup>

Israeli Arabs have not proven immune to ISIS's appeal. As of 2017, at least 60 Israelis, including two Jewish converts to Islam, were known to have traveled to Syria or Iraq to fight with *jihadist* groups, leading Israel to revoke the citizenship of the 19 known to be fighting with ISIS.<sup>74</sup> In 2019, Israeli security forces announced the arrest and prosecution of two Israeli Arabs from the northern town of Tamra for plotting ISIS-linked terror attacks.<sup>75</sup> And in March 2020, an Israeli Arab doctor was killed in battle while fighting within ISIS ranks in Syria, the Shin Bet said. His brother was arrested.<sup>76</sup>

*Uncoordinated Terrorism*

Greater security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority since the end of the Second Intifada has greatly diminished the number of bombings and other coordinated attacks. Today, lone wolf attacks predominate. In recent years, there have been several spikes in lone wolf attacks, mostly committed by Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. One spike was in the summer of 2014 after the murder and immolation of a Muslim teenager, Mohammad Abu Khdeir, by Jewish terrorists in retaliation for the kidnapping and murder of three Jewish teenage hitchhikers at Alon Shvut.<sup>77</sup> The violence took the form of vehicular assault, stabbings, stone throwing, and arson. The use of firecrackers was particularly prominent.<sup>78</sup> Rioters also targeted East Jerusalem infrastructure, destroying three light rail stations.<sup>79</sup>

Another spike in terrorism occurred during the 2017 Temple Mount Crisis. Accusations that Israel will annul the Supreme Muslim Council's control of the Temple Mount often provoke violence. On July 14, 2017, three Israeli Muslims from Umm al-Fahm who were affiliated with the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement murdered two policemen at the Temple Mount. The Israeli government responded by placing metal detectors at the entrances to the site. The security measure elicited a furious reaction, expressed through terrorism. One particularly gruesome attack involved the fatal stabbing of three people during a Shabbat dinner in Halamish. After the attack, police found the perpetrator's suicide note, which explicitly cited the Temple Mount controversy as justification for the murders.<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, the Israeli Cabinet voted to remove all security measures introduced at the Temple Mount after the 14 July attack.

The Palestinian Authority exacerbated the violence by calling for a "day of rage" in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in response to the metal detectors,<sup>81</sup> approving demonstrations organized by the Fatah affiliated Tanzim militia against the Israeli security measures,<sup>82</sup> and offering free university tuition to students participating in the subsequent rioting.<sup>83</sup> PA incitement against Israel stretches back to its establishment, when it assumed responsibility for the Palestine Mujahidin and Martyrs Fund, renamed the Palestinian Authority Martyrs Fund, which pays stipends to families of Palestinians imprisoned, injured, or killed for terrorism against Israelis. In 2017, the fund paid terrorists and their families over \$347 million, according to PA records.<sup>84</sup> In 2019, the PA increased its "pay to slay" program by some 11%, giving over \$65 million to imprisoned terrorists and their families between January and May of that year.<sup>85</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Israel's population numbers nearly 8.6 million people, of which 74.6 percent is Jewish<sup>86</sup> and 17.7 percent is Muslim.<sup>87</sup> Within this body politic, however, deep divisions exist over the future of the state. According to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, 76 percent of Israeli Jews believe that Israel can simultaneously be a Jewish state and a democracy, whereas only 27 percent of Israeli Arabs agree with this sentiment. However, 60 percent of Israeli Arabs have a positive view of the state and 49 percent of Israeli Muslims do.<sup>88</sup>

The tension between Israel and its Arab citizens is also evident in the traditionally nomadic Bedouin community. Official Israeli neglect of the Bedouin communities in the Negev and difficulty transitioning from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle has spawned increasing alienation from the state among that community—an alienation that the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement is exploiting. Thus, when the military planned a parade through Rahat, Israel's largest Bedouin town, to celebrate Israel's 63rd Independence Day in 2011, the town's mayor, Faiz Abu Sahiban, who belongs to the Islamic Movement, objected, preferring to commemorate the 1948 exodus of the Palestinian refugees instead.<sup>89</sup> This came in the wake of violent resistance to the Israeli government demolishing a mosque built illegally on public land in 2010 by the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement.<sup>90</sup>

Concerns that Bedouin alienation might breed violence increased when two Bedouin from the Negev, Mahmoud Abu Quider, aged 24, and his 21-year-old brother Samah, confessed in January 2013 to planning

to fire rockets, mount a suicide bombing at the Beer Sheba Central Bus Station, and launch other attacks. Before their arrest, the brothers built several explosive devices and traded drugs for an IDF soldier's rifle.<sup>91</sup> In another incident in 2015, Bedouin teachers from the South were suspected of promoting the ideology of the Islamic State in a local school.<sup>92</sup> The perpetrator of a deadly terrorist attack in Beer Sheba in October 2015 attended the same school.<sup>93</sup> Then, in December 2017, two Bedouin stabbed to death an Israeli soldier at an Arad bus stop.<sup>94</sup>

The Northern Branch is increasingly penetrating the Negev and successfully discouraging Bedouin from joining the IDF, where a high percentage of Bedouin have historically served, mainly in scouting or tracking capacities. Furthermore, as the Islamic Movement has gained control of more town councils in Bedouin areas, they have been able to use their authority to obstruct the hiring of Bedouin who serve in the military.<sup>95</sup> There has been a public debate over whether young Arab Israelis should be perform mandatory military or national service. In this case, opinions are significantly divided between Jewish and Arab respondents; the majority of the Jews polled support this requirement (74.1 percent) while the majority of Arabs oppose it (71.8 percent).<sup>96</sup>

Despite the growth of the Islamic Movement, the Israeli Muslim community remains less religious than the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza. According to a 2016 Pew survey, 68 percent of Israeli Muslims say religion is very important in their lives, while the corresponding number among Palestinians is 85 percent.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, support for terrorism is much lower among Israeli Muslims. A 2014 Pew Research Center poll found that while 46 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza believe suicide bombings can be justified to defend Islam “often” or “sometimes,” only 16 percent of Israeli Muslims feel that way.<sup>98</sup> In 2018, a poll showed that the percentage of Palestinians who support “armed resistance” against Israel was 35%, up from 30% the preceding year.<sup>99</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Israel has struggled with Islamism and Islamist sentiment both internally and externally. Officially, Israel sees the political-legal status of Israeli Arabs as a purely domestic matter without strategic implications. At the same time, however, it has traditionally refused to recognize Israeli Arabs as a national minority possessing collective rights apart from specific cases (such as in the education system and family law, each religious community being subject to its own clerics). This opening in the education system has enabled Israeli Arabs to cultivate a separate national identity—and created an ideological space in which Islamism can increasingly take root.

The country's Education Ministry has attempted to counter Islamism by banning the teaching of the Nakba (“catastrophe,” the common Arabic reference for the establishment of Israel in 1948) in schools, by forcing students to sing *Hatikva* (the Israeli national anthem) and by rewarding schools that encourage military and national service. Many Israeli Arab leaders have voiced opposition to the campaign to promote Israeli Arab participation in national service, terming it a veiled attempt by the government to erode the community's sense of unity.<sup>100</sup>

Externally, Israel's national security was deeply and negatively impacted by the Arab Spring of 2011. First and foremost, the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in February 2011 undermined law and order in the Sinai Peninsula, enabling al-Qaeda to develop a base there. As of May 2011, senior Egyptian security officials estimated that over 400 al-Qaeda militants were operating in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>101</sup> The growing Islamist presence in the Sinai resulted in increasing terrorism originating from the territory. In August 2011, eight Israelis were killed in a cross-border attack by militants belonging to the Mujahideen Shura Council from the Environs of Jerusalem, an al-Qaeda affiliate founded in 2011 and operational in Gaza and Sinai. The Mujahideen Shura Council launched rocket attacks on Sderot in August 2012<sup>102</sup> and March 2013, during President Obama's visit to Israel,<sup>103</sup> as well as to Eilat in April 2013.<sup>104</sup> However,

today, the main threat to Israel from its southern border emanates from the Sinai.

From the end of the Mubarak regime until June 2012, there was a significant increase in the number of attacks against the gas pipelines in the region and terrorist infiltration to Israel.<sup>105</sup> Salafi- *jihadists* see the pipelines as an instance of an Islamic resource sold to the Zionist enemy.<sup>106</sup>

Smuggling is another issue of concern to the Israeli security forces. Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip significantly increased the smuggling of weapons, food and fuel to Gaza.<sup>107</sup> This was much intensified after Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007.<sup>108</sup> Alongside the smuggling, the organization created an extensive network of tunnels contributing to the Gazan economy \$230 million per month.<sup>109</sup> During 2014's Operation Protective Edge, one of Israel's goals was to terminate cross border tunnels, which were widely used for smuggling arms and people. The IDF destroyed of 32 tunnels. Unfortunately, Israel has not yet fully succeeded in developing technology to deal with the tunnels.<sup>110</sup> IDF officials and residents living near the Gazan border have expressed worry that Hamas is reconstructing its tunnels demolished in 2014.<sup>111</sup> The Israeli-Egyptian border (around 230 kilometers in length) is also characterized by extensive smuggling of people, drugs, weapons, and goods. After the Israeli disengagement, the Israeli-Egyptian border has also become a transit point of two types of terrorists: specialists in the manufacture of weapons and terrorists on their way to attack Israel.<sup>112</sup>

There are today several looming threats to Israel's security. The first is a more powerful Hezbollah, which gained valuable battlefield experience in Syria and may entrench itself on the Syrian-Israeli border after the Assad regime regains control of the area. The second is the deteriorating economic situation in Gaza, where more than 60% of the population is dependent on humanitarian aid,<sup>113</sup> increases the likelihood of another war between Israel and Hamas, which desperately wants to break the naval blockade of the Strip. The recent Hamas-orchestrated demonstrations along the Gaza-Israel border wall, which resulted in notable Palestinian fatalities, also risked igniting another war.<sup>114</sup> Lastly, Israel must confront greater radicalization of its Arab citizens, particularly the Bedouin, long the country's poorest group by several orders of magnitude.<sup>115</sup>

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