

# Understanding Israel's Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Identity and Security

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**ABSTRACT** *The objective of this research paper is to apply an integration of two main theoretical frameworks, realism and constructivism, to explore the dynamics of Israel's perception of threat and security policies. By employing Stacy J. Barkin's realist constructivism, this paper signifies the importance of this approach in understanding Israel's policy toward a major challenge: the Palestinian issue. With the help of realist constructivism, our insights into Israel's threat perceptions and decision-making are enhanced. Thus, understanding the behavior of the Jewish state becomes less daunting. Using process tracing and discourse analysis as methodologies, the study applies two case studies to explore how identity and security perceptions shape the policy of Israel. Realists have always regarded the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an example that signifies their theory. The findings of this paper debunk such an argument by proving that realist constructivism is more helpful in understanding this conflict.*

**Keywords:** Israel, Foreign Policy, Identity, Security, Realism

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## Introduction

Ever since its establishment in 1948, Israel has faced external conditions identified by almost continuous enmity. Relative to its adversaries, Israel is considered a tiny state with limited recourse in terms of population and landmass. Moreover, Israel shares borders with hostile states that refuse to recognize its existence and non-state actors that create security challenges for its continuity. Shimon Peres, former President of Israel, described the security threats facing Israel by arguing that “we need to protect ourselves from knives, tanks, and rockets.”<sup>1</sup> Such discourse reveals how Israeli policymakers identify different threats: “knives” refer to non-state armed actors (including Hamas, Fateh, and Hezbollah); “tanks” signify the danger that Israel faces from neighboring states, such as Syria; and “rockets” indicate the danger coming from regional actors, particularly Iran.

Despite Israel being a small nation, it has been able to project itself as a vital player in world politics. Both Israel’s position in the international arena and its severe national security make it a matter of wide interest for observers and strategic studies scholars. Unlike other political entities, Israel has a unique aspect with regard to hostility, menace, and geostrategic challenges. Both Poland and France were conquered by Nazi Germany in World War II but sustained as enduring national entities, and the majority of the population persisted in the war relatively well. Jewish community on the other hand, has faced not just politicide but also genocide and the annihilation of its people.

Given the Arab hostility toward Israel during the first decades of its establishment, it was unlikely for Israel to control the external environment at the diplomatic and military levels. Although, since 1948, Israel has won every major war it fought with Arab armies, the nature of post-conflict peace is highly complicated for Israel to determine.

Despite the fact that many regional actors have signed a peace agreement with Israel, the danger that Israel faces from Iran and its proxies in the region has been considered Israel’s top security issue. The strategic environment for Israel changed massively after accepting the Sadat initiative of 1977, providing a greater prospect for peace than in the past.

Thus far, Iran has been perceived as Israel’s most dangerous regional rival. Tehran’s continuous aspiration and will for a military nuclear capacity poses a critical threat to Israel should it cross the nuclear threshold. In addition, if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, other regional actors will do the same. Any serious attempt to understand Israel’s foreign policy requires exploring the geopolitical condition of the region. Iran provides Hezbollah, a Lebanese proxy, with a massive arsenal of rockets that has proven to be hectic for the Israelis to deal

with. Moreover, the Iranians have a growing influence in Syria, creating a dangerous Syrian-Lebanese alliance (part of what is known as the Shiite Crescent) encompassing territory from Iran to the Mediterranean. On the southern border, Israel faces security threats from the elected government of Gaza which controls Gaza.

## **Tehran's continuous aspiration and will for a military nuclear capacity poses a critical threat to Israel should it cross the nuclear threshold**

So far, the political analysis of Israel's foreign policy is projected on two theories: realism and constructivism. Throughout the years, Israel's foreign policy practices have fallen under both approaches, albeit not equally. The failure to study foreign policy from a social science approach and connect the dots between at least two theories can produce results that fall short on essential components in each theory, especially if we consider one and disregard the other. The case of Israel specifically is an interesting one, given the long-standing conflict that it has been facing. This article attempts to answer the following major questions: To what extent does identity matter with regard to the formulation of the Israeli foreign policy? And would the fusion of realism and constructivism theories result in a better understanding of Israel's policy and decision-making process, more precisely, its foreign policy?

### **Realist Constructivism**

In a world where dangerous phenomena abound, understanding why a state pursues a particular foreign policy helps governments decide whether that state poses a threat or not. When a state is appropriately aware of actors in the international system that intends to inflict harm on it, this state has an opportunity to use its resources to protect itself from such threats. Nevertheless, when states miscalculate and take inaccurate measures, they run the risk of being exposed to danger or turning a benign actor into an adversary. As a result, states need to recognize what constitutes a threat.

Delving into International Relations (IR) theory for enlightenment, realists argue that states' actions result from pursuing imperative national interests, mainly power maximization.<sup>2</sup> The dilemma in realism's argument assumes a constant view of the notion of "national interests." While realism acknowledges the role of ideology, the theoretical approach ignores the way that ideological factors impact how states identify power and delineate their interests. Constructivism, which has been regarded as a rival of realism, may enhance realists' understanding of IR. Constructivists insist that ideas and culture are vital in constituting states' behavior. Thus, constructivism can supplement realism's insights through social and nonmaterial lenses. The integration of both

theoretical approaches can explain the social factors' function in formulating foreign policy. Thus, a clearer image of intent and behavior can be seen.

In this part, we try to examine the debate between prominent theoretical approaches in IR: realism and constructivism. Usually, IR scholars focus on a specific theoretical approach in analyzing states' behavior in world politics. Conversely, this article seeks to integrate realism and constructivism to understand Israel's foreign policy dynamics. Some theorists of IR explicitly agree that both realism and constructivism are incompatible approaches. However, the bulk of this article reveals the opposite –realism and constructivism are indeed compatible. By exploring Barkin's realist constructivism, this article seeks to debunk the myth of realism and constructivism's incompatibility. Applying realist constructivism could prove valuable in IR theory, including helping indicate the connection between the study of power in international politics and the study of IR as a social construction. The second part delves deeply into Barkin's realist constructivist approach to IR.

In the realist thought, humans are concerned with their well-being in their competitive relations with one another. Thus, it is not unnatural for humans to be preoccupied with achieving a dominant position in life and reject being subjugated by others. Being malignant and pessimistic is not exclusive to humans' interactions but rather a vital aspect of IR. Classical realists agree that the acquisition, possession, and usage of power are central aspects of international politics. As a result, IR is regarded as "power politics," a realm of conflict, rivalry, and war between or among states who seek to realize their national interests and survival. For realists, IR is synonymous with power politics.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, an array of differences among realists revolve around an important question: Why do states need power? According to Morgenthau, the desire for power is deeply rooted in human nature. Humans are, by nature, political animals –they demand control and enjoy their gains. As far as Morgenthau is concerned, IR is all about power struggle.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, John Mearsheimer argues that power is considered the main currency of international politics. The consideration of economic and military relations among states is a central feature of realist thought. States seek to maintain the balance of power in their favor and attempt to avoid situations that endanger their positions in the international system.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, neo-realists assert that human nature has little to do with why states seek power. Instead, the anarchic structure of the international system forces states to pursue power. Given the international system's anarchic nature and the absence of a higher authority, states act at their best to ensure their survival. Neo-realists perceive states similarly; whether a state is democratic or authoritarian is an overlooked factor in their analysis. As Mearsheimer argues, "neo-realists treat states as if they were black boxes."<sup>6</sup> Neo-realists grapple with another pressing question: how much power

is enough? For Kenneth Waltz, gaining too much control in world politics is an unwise decision. Waltz argues that the international system will punish states seeking power maximization and hegemony.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Mearsheimer concludes that each state must pursue a power maximization strategy and, if the conditions allow, seek hegemony.

The debate here lies beyond domination; it emphasizes the role of power in ensuring one's survival in an anarchic system. As Mearsheimer adds, "for classical realists, power is an end in itself; for neo-realists, power is a means to an end, and the ultimate end is survival."<sup>8</sup>

According to Waltz, a scientific theory of IR must help predict how states would behave. Furthermore, Waltz adds that a good IR theory must focus on the structure of the system, its interacting units, and its fluctuations. For classical realists, leaders' actions and decisions are central to their theory. For Morgenthau, states' leaders have a natural lust for power.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, neo-realists tend to take the distribution of power as an integral unit of analysis. According to Waltz, understanding the structure's influence on foreign policy is an indispensable factor in international politics; neorealism efforts to "abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities" show the significance of anarchy and the distribution of power. The interaction of states creates what is known as the international structure, and the structure forces each state to take some actions and refrain from others. In an anarchic system, where no higher authority sits above nations, states must do their best to protect themselves. As Waltz puts it, "every unit must put itself in a position to be able to take care of itself since no one else can be counted on to do so." In such an international system, states will pursue different power political narratives to survive in a self-help system.<sup>10</sup>

The critical insight behind the constructivist argument can be understood by unpacking an observation made by Alexander Wendt. Wendt argues that "500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the U.S. than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons."<sup>11</sup> In this observation, an array of features that distinguish constructivism from other IR approaches can be detected—its critique of materialism, its insistence on the social construction of interests, its various logic of anarchy, and its relationship between structure and agents. From Wendt's observation, a vital puzzle in the field of IR can be comprehended using the constructivist approach: "how states come to see others as enemies and friends."<sup>12</sup> Exploring the dynamics of how social and relational phenomena are created

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in international politics is an enigma that constructivism tries to explain. The central insight of constructivism is that meaning is “socially constructed.” According to Wendt, “a fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act towards objects, including other actors, based on the meanings that the objects have for them.”<sup>13</sup> In a socially constructed world, the web of meanings and practices in world politics constitutes actors’ behavior.

Nevertheless, these meanings and practices should not be regarded as stable; they are continuously changing. For instance, sovereignty is viewed as a changing social institution that evolves. A sovereign state can be sovereign once all states see it as a corporate state with rights and obligations over a specific territory and people. As a social institution keeps changing in a socially constructed world, so do the power and identities of existing states. For example, a massive violation conducted by a state against its people would legitimize an international intervention by other states. Thereby, sovereignty is a changing institution with a vital role in IR that rests on various shared ideas and practices.<sup>14</sup>

A challenging approach to ‘social construction’ in IR is the notion known as ‘materialism,’ which precludes that material objects directly influence outcomes that are unaltered by the ideas that people bring to them. Neo-realists consider materialism as a principle feature of world politics. They regard the purely material forces of military power and strategic assets as fundamental in explaining the patterns that constitute ‘power.’ As Mearsheimer argues, “the distribution of material capabilities among states is the key factor for understanding world politics.”<sup>15</sup> As for neoliberals, they argue that people’s ideas about the world have little to do with forming states’ material interests. Constructivists agree that the ideas that give shape to international politics are more than the viewpoints of individuals.<sup>16</sup> Instead, global politics is shaped by intersubjective and institutionalized ideas. However, according to Wendt, such ideas are “not so much mental as symbolic and organizational; they are embedded not only in human brains but also in the collective memories, government procedures, educational systems, and the rhetoric of statecraft.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it should be clear that the constructivist argument does not seek to substitute materialism with idealism. Instead, constructivism suggests that understanding the social concepts that create meaning for human life is essential in recognizing how the perception of material forces forms.<sup>18</sup>





Waltz adds that the initial cause of wars has to do with human nature or the domestic politics of predator states.<sup>19</sup> Anarchy may consist of dynamics that lead to competitive power politics, but this is a highly contested point. For neo-realists, the material structure of anarchy is responsible for states' formation of interests. In neorealism, the way in which anarchy is subjugated to practice in world politics is totally overlooked. In his definition of a political structure, Waltz argues that the ordering principle, the principle of differentiation, and the distribution of capabilities constitute the building blocks for such a system.<sup>20</sup> However, his definition has little to do with predicting how states will behave. Intersubjective factors, such as whether states will perceive one another as friends or foes, will be the status quo, and revisionists will recognize that each state's sovereignty is not taken into consideration by other states.<sup>21</sup>

Walt argues that the balance of power is not the primary driver for states' actions. Instead, the balance of threats positively controls the way governments would act in world politics. Threats are not given attributes of world politics but are the result of interactions. Threats are "socially constructed." The distribution of power indeed plays a vital role in states' security and strategic calculation.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, these calculations are controlled by intersubjective understandings and expectations, which create the "distribution of knowledge" that institute the conception of the self and the other. For example, if both the Soviet

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin (C) poses for a photo with the new cabinet after the Knesset (Israel's parliament) gave confidence to the new coalition government in Jerusalem on June 14, 2021.

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Union and the U.S. agreed that they were not enemies anymore, then the Cold War would end. Thus, the structure that manages states' actions is the result of collective meanings. An institution is a moderately stable group of identities and interests. These institutions are not given units in our social world. Instead, they are fundamentally cognitive entities that result from the actor's thoughts about how the world works. According to Wendt, these institutions should not be regarded as unreal entities; however, they are an array of "nothing but" beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

Neorealism and neoliberalism are both rationalist theories; both paradigms are built on the notion of microeconomics theory's choice-theoretic assumptions. Their international politics analysis is presumed to take political actors, mainly states, as rational and self-interested units. Actors are seen as pre-social; their identities and interests are treated as autogenous. Also, actors' interests are taken as exogenously formed away from any social interaction. For constructivists, social interaction is an indispensable factor in their analysis of how states formulate their interests.<sup>24</sup>

Both realists and constructivists tend to classify their theories as incompatible. For them, either power or ideas control world politics. The dilemma within the realist account is that it takes power relations to determine how IR works. According to Barkin, realism has a lot to say about how the struggle for power shapes the way that actors behave in the international system. However, realism fails to provide a narrative on how states perceive and pursue power.<sup>25</sup>

To enhance our<sup>26</sup> understanding of international politics, this study proposes a hybrid approach to better understand Israel's foreign policy: Barkin's realist constructivism. According to Barkin, realist constructivism "explores how power structures affect patterns of normative change in international relations and, conversely, how a particular set of norms affect power structures."<sup>27</sup>

This theoretical approach applies constructivists' principles to realism's worldview, which leads to improving our understanding of how ideas control specific decisions in foreign policy. Barkin's approach, in connection to IR, promotes investigating how social factors influence perceptions of interests and how power is described. Barkin argues that both realism and constructivism are labeled as two different paradigms, which makes these theoretical approaches suffer from what he calls "castle syndrome."<sup>28</sup> These theoretical approaches are being overly defined, which makes studying IR meaningless. This flawed labeling of realism and constructivism makes them look mutually contradictory and incompatible. Realism and constructivism are regarded as inconsistent, and such inconsistency lies behind exploring both approaches' core concepts separately. For example, classical realists argue that institutions are imperfectible. Here, the question of security and power, which are core assumptions in



the realist thought, is dismissed. Realists' answer to such a question becomes problematic since realism does not provide perfect solutions. Instead, theoretical approaches other than realism are necessary.<sup>29</sup>

The core argument behind Barkin's approach is that studying IR in a paradigmatic way is problematic. This paradigmatic way of labeling IR theories resulted in creating and encouraging paradigmatic imperialism, which demolished any discipline communication. Both realism and constructivism seem to stand in direct opposition to each other. This sort of thinking can be seen in the writings of an array of IR theorists. For instance, the main critique that constructivism had been toward the arguments conducted by neo-realists regarding the structure of the international system.<sup>30</sup> In this case, constructivism is seen as a counterpart of neorealism. Nevertheless, standing in opposition to neorealism is not necessarily a critique of classical realism itself. This tone of argument constructivism critique of neorealism seems to create the notion of incompatibility between constructivism and realism itself. According to Barkin, constructivism should not be regarded as an IR paradigm. Also, arguing that constructivism resembles a different ontology, epistemology, or methodology results from a paradigm castle mentality.<sup>31</sup>

For instance, constructivism has been regarded as a challenger to materialism and rationalism, with a wall splitting social construction into a materialist mindset on the one hand and a rationalist mindset on the other. The constructivist-rationalist contending arguments are central debates in the field of IR theory. Constructivists who argue that their methodology is incompatible with realism emphasize how realism tends to grapple with both materialism and rationalism.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, realists who claim that their theory is incompatible with constructivism insist that the latter tends to be utopians and idealists.<sup>33</sup> According to Barkin, such arguments reflect a deprived understanding of both realism and constructivism. In-depth scrutiny of classical realism suggests that it is compatible with the epistemology of constructivism. Nevertheless, this does not mean that right constructivism is absolute realism; instead, constructivist insights can prove to be beneficial to the realist tradition in international politics.<sup>34</sup>

A hybridization of constructivism and realism would be helpful in an array of fields in IR theory. Taking pure material capabilities in international politics becomes less useful without exploring the social aspects. While constructivism draws on a broader meaning of power than realism does, the latter is compatible with constructivist understanding, being both relational and social. This form of examining theoretical approaches would enhance our understanding

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of the relationships between power politics and the study of IR ideas on the one hand and the analysis of the social construction of international politics on the other. According to Barkin, studying IR in a paradigmatic way would demolish any severe understanding of how world politics operates. In constructivism, global politics is regarded as a sociological realm that takes political institutions as social constructs.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, realism focuses on the political; power is considered a significant feature.

On the one hand, constructivism tells how to study politics but ignores how politics works. Meanwhile, realism tells how politics works but not how to study politics. Thus, it makes little sense to focus on a singular paradigm in scrutiny regarding international politics. Since the end of the Cold War, constructivism has come to be known in IR as a critique of realism. Adopting this mentality enabled many scholars to suggest that both theoretical approaches can be seen as distinct paradigms. This false dichotomy resulted from separating the social from the material aspects of the world. Constructivists have taken two variants against realism regarding materialism: first, realism tends to stress the importance of material capabilities as a foundation of power; and second, realism takes certain assumptions about human nature, which suggests that material and biological factors shape it. Actors' behavior in international politics, according to realists, is the outcome of the biological materialists associated with human nature. This accusation automatically assumes that notions such as insecurity and fear are dominant features of world politics. However, it should be clear that the realist logic does not suggest that all individuals are aggressive or self-interested. For Wendt, any social theory must take human nature as a starting point in theorizing.

Nevertheless, not all human nature theories are compatible with classical realism, especially those that argue that human nature can be perfectible. Those theories are regarded as incompatible with classical realism, which has to do with the ability of human nature to be perfected or molded by the proper social institutions. In this case, political power is not central in managing human affairs.<sup>36</sup>

Material capabilities should not be regarded as more than instrumental in achieving the desired outcome. However, having significant military power does not entail complete success in achieving specific results. For instance, nuclear weapons can do nothing but destroy. However, using nuclear weapons does not dictate that states can accomplish their preferred goals. Realists agree that power politics is highly contextual and relative and that its outcomes are

highly contingent. According to Waltz, nonmaterial factors must be considered while studying power politics in IR. After the behavioralist turn in IR, many realists have considered the vitality of taking nonmaterial elements as doctrine and threat seriously.<sup>37</sup>

This is where a realist constructivism synthesis would prove to be a great help in this thesis. This paper seeks to apply Barkin's theoretical approach, realist constructivism, to the Israeli case. From the previous writings mentioned above, integrating both theories to understand Israel's foreign policy has been overlooked for a long time. I argue that the Israeli case must be looked at from Barkin's perspective.

## Israel's Threat Perception

Israel is a tiny state. It is surrounded by Arab and broader Muslim states (a fundamentally hostile world to its existence), including Jordan and Egypt, which conducted peace agreements with Israel –or are explicitly dedicated to its demolition. Israel's Eastern borders, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank prove highly strategic areas; controlling this geographical area gives Israel a strategic military advance. Furthermore, the elongated shape of Israel's geography enhanced its width by fifteen kilometers, making Israel's management of its security a formidable task.

Regional and global changes in the contemporary era, however, have transformed Israel's strategic situation. The signing of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, the most powerful Arab state, removed Egypt from the confrontation equation with Israel and convinced the Arab states not to use conventional force against Israel. Indeed, Egypt's participation in the Arab-Israeli conflict was an essential pillar in the continuity of these wars. However, the aftermath of the Camp David Accords resulted in the elimination of any and all existential threats facing Israel in the foreseeable future, unless Iran or another regional actor procures nuclear weapons. Israel rejects a nuclear Iran because the Jewish state understands how destructive nuclear weapons are. In addition, Israel enjoys having a monopoly over nuclear weapons since these weapons tip the balance of power in favor of Israel. Simultaneously, although targeting Iranian nuclear sites is an option, Netanyahu sought to hamper the progress of the nuclear program by other methods. The U.S. and Israel launched cyber-attacks to undermine the Iranian centrifuges. The cyber-attacks were successful in hindering over a thousand centrifuges, but eventually, Iran was able to advance its nuclear weapon capabilities. Moreover, Israel continually assassinated members of the Iranian nuclear program team. In the 1960s, Israel launched an assassination program that targeted German scientists to cripple Nasser's attempt to build ballistic missiles for Egypt. Likewise, the Mossad an-

nounced its responsibility for killing Iranian nuclear scientists, yet, this stance did not cripple Iran's nuclear ambitions. In 2020, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh –the head of the Iranian nuclear program– was killed in Absard by remote-controlled weapons.<sup>38</sup>

Fakhrizadeh played a vital role in leading 'Project Amad,' a highly covert program founded in 1989 to accelerate research on a nuclear bomb. Nevertheless, evaluating the outcome of killing Fakhrizadeh is difficult at the moment. According to the Jewish Chronicle report, "it would take six years" to find a 'fully operational' replacement for Fakhrizadeh. Thus, Iran's bomb creation has been postponed for a credible period of time.<sup>39</sup> The magnitude of the attack created doubts within the Iranian political spectrum with regard to the accountability of Iran's security apparatuses' professionalism. As a result, Iran signed a counter-intelligence agreement with Russia to improve its cyber and information security.

The regional turmoil that started with the Arab Spring has contributed to hampering many states threatening Israel, but new threats have also surfaced. Indeed, the state of weakness that the Arab states are going through constitutes a significant security challenge to Israel. This vulnerability will allow non-state actors to increase their power and influence, particularly ISIS and Hezbollah.

Security is a primary concern for Israel. The notion of security has always been a vital pillar in formulating Israeli political views since any complacency can lead to the Jewish state's collapse. Many Israelis agree that security is a precondition for achieving a peace agreement with other actors, particularly Arab states. In fact, the way Israelis perceive security threats significantly contributes to shaping voting trends in the Knesset elections.<sup>40</sup>

The following section will explain how Israel's threat perception is formulated. Threats, as argued by Wendt, are the result of social interactions.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Israel's case resembles, to a tremendous extent, how social aspects alter the Jewish state's behavior.

## **The Social Construction of Threats: The Case of Israel**

Any serious attempt to study Middle East politics requires severe engagement with the social aspects that create foreign and security policies. The positivist-rationalist approaches adopted in Israeli studies have proven insufficient in explaining foreign policy behavior. Rather than explicitly focusing on power estimation and national interests, a constructivist account would explain what manifests them. A rationalist approach overlooks why and how the Israelis'

collective outlines itself concerning other collectives and fails to explain specific constructed images and identities.

Israeli society is a long way from being homogenous. Not to mention the Ultra-Orthodox Jews (*Haredim*) and their opposition to a secular Zionist state and the Israeli Arabs, who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, multitudes of Israelis are subjugated to a systematic process of conditioning that promotes the notion of “us and them” with regard to their interaction with others. In addition, the militarization process that the Israelis are exposed to deepens the negative phenomena that reinforce the construction of “the other,” which would negatively affect the Palestinians’ perception in the Israelis’ minds –considering the Palestinians use of force toward the Israelis. The focus of constructivism is on the social interpretation of reality, and it has been suggested that the creation of danger is created by a community’s discrimination against a threatening “other,” thus building a barrier between groups. Palestinian identity arose largely because of threats from Jewish immigrants.

As seen by the Israelis, the security challenges are represented by a set of security issues, such as a third Palestinian uprising (or *intifada*), smuggling of weapons into Gaza via Egypt, and terrorist attacks, including assassinations, kidnappings, and suicide bombings. In addition, one of the challenges to Israel is Hamas’s rockets from the Gaza Strip. During Operation Cast Lead, Israel was able to reduce Hamas’s missile threat, especially with the development of missiles capable of striking the Dimona nuclear facilities, which was a credible threat that created a sense of insecurity and anxiety among Israelis.

Furthermore, the Obama Administration agreed to grant Israel \$225 million to develop the Iron Dome anti-missile system. According to Israeli military analysts, the system has succeeded in intercepting 90 percent of Hamas’s rockets. The military conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is well-documented. However, Israel faces a tremendous and essential threat: the demographic threat. There is a consensus that the Jewish component will become a minority within the area of historical Palestine west of the Jordan River. In fact, many argue that the Palestinians’ high fertility rate and their continuous child-bearing will make Jews a minority in the foreseeable future. The demographic war between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs is the root cause of this enduring conflict.<sup>42</sup> According to Shimon Perez, the former president of Israel, “politics is a matter of demography, not geography.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, it makes good sense for the Israelis to argue that democracy must be subordinated to demography. Benjamin Netanyahu, previous Israel’s Prime Minister, stated



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## The Israeli spirit revolves around the idea of atrocities and crimes that Arabs have committed against Israelis

that a binational state with equal citizenship rights for Arabs and Jews would be a “disaster for Israel.”<sup>44</sup>

What embodies this fear of the demographic threat is the separation barrier that would deal more with the Palestinian increase in number than security threats. Indeed, the main objec-

tive of this barrier was not to focus on the security implications concerning Palestinian aggression. Instead, it aimed at making the Jews a majority in Israel by annexing places with a heavy presence of Jews in the West Bank and “pushing out” areas with a dense Palestinian presence. To many Israelis, this demographic dilemma is perceived as more threatening than any military danger. With this kind of challenge, Israel cannot win in the fields of war. The feeling of insecurity and anxiety is a prominent feature in Israeli social life; the collective memory is formulated by the integration of factors such as religion, culture, and historical dynamics existing before the establishment of the state in 1948. These factors combined create a situation of exceptionalism and a siege mentality in Israeli society. It works to explain Israel’s external behavior toward the Palestinians in particular and its rivals in general. A considerable amount of literature explains how historical grievances have contributed to shaping Israeli society’s security perceptions. Moreover, it explains the way such historical grievances formulate Israel’s behavior toward notions such as peace and war. According to Meron, an array of factors are integrated into forming the identity of Israelis –first, a group of ideas within the group that differentiate between who is Israeli and who is not. These ideas, whether imaginary or hereditary, are intended to promote the creation of a social image.

The Israeli spirit revolves around the idea of atrocities and crimes that Arabs have committed against Israelis. From the early confrontation with Arabs, notions such as curbing Jews’ immigration and harming them physically were perceived by Jews as essential threats and were supplementing the idea of Jewish victimization. In addition, these notions of victimization are reinforced continuously by incidences and discourses that express hatred toward Jews and wipe Israel from existence.

All wars fought, the embargo on Israeli trade and terrorist attacks on Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis created an incentive for victimhood. Throughout their history, the massacres suffered by Jews at the height of the Holocaust, in addition to special treatment (such as defamation, special taxes, and forced transfers), all reinforce victimhood.

Constructivism proves to be helpful in explaining the social aspects of the Arab-Israeli issue. It argues that the social environment of individuals generates

a definition of people as a social identity. In addition, constructivism suggests the ways and means by which political charters identify the material and social world. The identity-based argument stresses that a distinct state that separates the Jewish Zionists and the Palestinian Arabs stems from the notion of insecurity as a result of being a minority in their homeland. Moreover, constructivism agrees that the social reality must be explained, explored, and understood.

The birth of the Palestinian conflict is highly related to the collision of the Palestinian identity with the Jewish immigrants' identity. Such a clash of identities resulted in conflicting political agents in the region, especially in Jordan.<sup>45</sup> The conflict intensified when the Balfour Declaration promised European Zionism a homeland for Jews in Palestine. Given a number of historical factors, Judaism is not perceived as a religion or ethnicity; rather, Judaism is an ethno-religion. Despite this fact, the Jewish identity plays an essential role in enhancing the notion of the religion's link to the land, and this is a major reason for the conflict.

### **Far-Right Zionism: Ideology and Security**

Despite Jabotinsky's *realpolitik* position, his political thought was not totally built on day-to-day politics, even though power is central in the far-right Zionist wing. Jabotinsky's work always has an aspect that focuses on identity. In other words, Jabotinsky's work is the result of the integration of emotional and intellectual constructed ideas with *realpolitik*. Jabotinsky's intellectual philosophy stood strong against two rival thoughts: the *galut* thought, which emphasizes a Jewish stateless life, and the labor thought, which had critical disagreements with Jabotinsky's proposal with regard to Eretz Israel –the land of Israel. The *galut* proposal was strongly rejected by all Zionists, who viewed the condition of stateless Jews as being highly threatening to their existence; Zionists argue that Jews in diaspora would place them under subordination and persecution of others. Labor Zionism, which sought the creation of a perfect society in Eretz Israel, was perceived by right-wing Zionists as a critical challenge to the establishment of the Jewish state. The labor movement in Palestine was successful in building impressive, multidimensional movements, including the collective farm settlements (*Kibbutzim*), the communal farm settlements (*Moshavim*), and the labor union (*Histadrut*).<sup>46</sup>

Most, although not all, beliefs of the Zionist right were laid down by and during the well-known career of Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky's critical approach to political life, with other principles offered by him, was assumed by not only his contemporaries but also his successors in the Zionist right. Before the eruption of the major Arab-Israeli wars, power had been a highly significant aspect in the writing of Jabotinsky's Zionist right-wing narrative.

Eretz Yisrael, or the land of Israel, is the traditional Jewish name for an area of indefinite geographical extension in the Southern Levant. Related biblical, religious and historical English terms include the Land of Canaan, the Promised Land, the Holy Land, and Palestine.

In his distinguished novel *Samson*, Jabotinsky encourages his followers to live as a “wolf within wolves.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, such a narrative can be detected in Jabotinsky’s writings about the importance of power as a vital pillar in accommodating such a wolfish world. Such conflictual “human nature” prescribes, to a great extent, how realists perceive military power as a necessary tool in world politics. According to Jabotinsky, military power is a significant tool in IR; however, this does not exempt the importance of diplomatic efforts in managing global affairs. Betar, the organization, formed and led by Jabotinsky, was openly militaristic, endorsing parades, emphasizing uniforms, and so forth. Jabotinsky, who encouraged such characteristics, argues that history is formed and shaped by force, not reason.<sup>48</sup>

National power, military strength, and discipline were not the only citations found in the writings of Jabotinsky. His writings focused on a critical challenge that the Jewish people faced during his lifetime—the creation of the land of Israel on both sides of the Jordan River. Revisionism, after all, came into being after the establishment of the “Partition Plan” to curb the Arab–Jewish conflict—a notion rejected by Jabotinsky and his adherents. In addition, Jabotinsky was labeled as a proponent of nationalism. After finishing a law degree in Italy, Jabotinsky understood the vitality of nationalism, viewing it as a constructive socio-political force. Nationalism became, for Jabotinsky and for many far-right Zionists, an ultimate value. Begin, Shamir, Netanyahu, and their associates fully captivated that attitude.<sup>49</sup>

Begin had a different point of view than Jabotinsky with regard to the future of the region. Being part of the right-wing Zionist movement, Begin had more radical perceptions than Jabotinsky toward the territory of Eretz Israel. Although Jabotinsky was a prominent member of the Zionist executive, his acceptance of the exclusion of Transjordan from mandatory Palestine was seen by Begin as a massive escalation. For Begin, excluding Jordan from what subscribed to as the “Greater Israel” was unacceptable. According to Begin, Jabotinsky was accused of abandoning the sacred belief of the movement “Two Banks Hath the Jordan.” In 1938, Begin sought to expel the British from Palestine by emulating the Irish experience. While Jabotinsky was an adherent of law and justice, Begin strongly disagreed with Jabotinsky’s stances. The anti-Semitic atmosphere of Eastern Europe, the atrocities conducted by Nazi Germans, as well as the reluctance of the British to fulfill their commitment to Zionism radicalized many adherents of the far-right Zionist camp.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding the prominence of power, it must be clear that Zionism in general, in most of its variants, is an empowering movement, highlighting the “can do” notion, the determination to create a Jewish state, and embracing all essentials of national power. Regarding power, neo-revisionism and revisionist Zionism are highly compatible with many variants of Zionism. Nevertheless, the right tends to adopt military power more than other variants of Zionism.<sup>51</sup>

**Given a number of historical factors, Judaism is not perceived as a religion or ethnicity; rather, Judaism is an ethno-religion**

Both the revisionists and the neo-revisionists claimed that only Jews were allowed to govern all of Eretz Israel. Oppositely, other variants of Zionism rejected the notion of Jewish control of all of Palestine. Despite the agreement within the Zionist variants with regard to territorial policies, revisionist, neo-revisionist, and left Zionism have different perspectives toward the outside world –the non-Jewish people. Because of its emergence during World War II, neo-revisionism adopted the Holocaust discourse in managing the Arab-Israeli conflict. Neo-revisionists, including Begin, tended to infer the pro-Palestinian positions as anti-Semitic. In addition, Begin, as the chief of neo-revisionism, viewed Arabs in terms of *realpolitik*. Begin sought the deprivation of Arabs from any political rights in the Jewish state. Meanwhile, Jabotinsky, an adherent of European liberalism, supported the notion of equal rights for Arabs in the Jewish state. Jabotinsky approved the idea of a Jewish state (with a Jewish majority) that provides equal rights for both Jews and Arabs. Moreover, Jabotinsky was totally convinced that Arabs are entitled to not only personal rights but also national rights.

At the core of neo-revisionism was to locate as many settlements as possible in the West Bank and Gaza. While the Labor Party sought the placement of Israelis in the territories between 1967 and 1977, Likud was trying to shift the demographic balance in territories so that Israel could annex them in the future. Clearly, the numbers of settlers and settlement projects emphasize the project of the Israeli annexation of territories. When Begin became the Prime Minister of Israel, the number of Jewish settlements was limited to 24, with a total of 3,200 inhabitants. When Begin retired in 1983, the number of settlements increased to 106, the number of settlers exceeding 28,400.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the labor party followed the Allon Plan, which stressed Israel's security by establishing settlements in highly strategic locations. During the last two years of Begin in office, Likud started the “Suburban Phase” project to expand the total population of Israelis in the territories.

According to Likud strategists, the integration of territories into Eretz Israel, supplemented with increasing the bulk of inhabitants in settlements, will create high pressure for future withdrawal.<sup>53</sup> The settlement project of Likud is

## Regarding power, neo-revisionism and revisionist Zionism are highly compatible with many variants of Zionism

an implementation of the revisionist and neo-revisionist ideologies, with its stress on power, territory, and rejection to work toward a negotiated concession between the two nations. The Zionist right has always regarded the Arab-Jewish struggle over territories, and after 1977, when the first far-right government was formed, an

unprecedented large scale of territories was integrated into Israel. The massive land annexation by Israel, particularly under the governance of Begin, radicalized the Palestinians and led to the eruption of the first *intifada* in 1987.

While members of the Likud Party sought the annexation of the territory as a vital policy, Yitzhak Rabin, a Labor Prime Minister of Israel, disagreed with such revisionist proposals. For Rabin, Judea and Samaria are critical parts of contemporary Israel. Nevertheless, many adherents of the Labor Party agreed to relinquish territories for the sake of the Jewish state. In other words, the Labor Party was more favorable toward a Jewish democratic state rather than a Greater Israel with demographic imbalances.

From the very beginning, settlements were a vital security aspect in sustaining the security of Israel. Without the civilian settler, the security forces would face heavy challenges in managing the security and sovereignty of Israel. This logic applies to not only Judea and Samaria but also the Galilee and the Negev. Rather than seeking the protection of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the settler existence in Judea and Samaria strengthens the army's effectiveness. Without the existence of expanding Jewish settlements throughout Judea and Samaria, conducting operations that require a strong physical presence can be a problematic mission. After Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, for instance, the Har Bracha settlement provided the IDF forces with strategic points that assisted in conducting successful operations in Nablus. With the presence of a "mass population" in settlements located in the West Bank, the IDF can maintain security control with a relatively small number of combat personnel.

Today, exploring the far-right helps us understand Israel's insistence on rejecting the two-state solution. In a summit with Biden in 2021, the Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett stated that "under my watch, there won't be a Palestinian state."<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the dynamics of the Israeli foreign and security policies. With the aid of Barkin's realist constructivism, understanding



Israel's behavior toward Iran and the Palestinians becomes a less challenging task. However, the purpose of this study has nothing to do with theory building. Instead, it was to test the significance of Barkin's approach in exploring Israel's decision-making mentality. Thus, this paper is a theory-testing, not a theory-building inquiry. Realist constructivism allows an understanding of how social aspects alter materialism and vice versa. With regard to the Israeli case, both materialism and social aspects contribute to the behavior of the Jewish state. When investigating the Palestinian dilemma, it would be misleading to explore the material aspect of the conflict without further scrutiny of the social aspect. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a mere challenge of security and power. Instead, demography and identity constitute the main pivot of the conflict.

On the whole, applying realist constructivism to these two case studies enhances our understanding of world politics. The shift in regional politics created new power realities that enhanced the rivalry between Iran and Israel, and this was accelerated due to the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of the U.S. as a unipolar actor. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of Iraq, both the Iranian and Israeli geopolitical position was improved.

Nevertheless, this enhancement of geopolitical positions has made the rivalry between Iran and Israel a highly dangerous game. In addition, the opening of a Tehran-Washington dialogue created incentives for Israel to curb such rapprochement. Israel sought any Iranian American rapprochement as a critical threat to its national security; since an Israeli alliance with the U.S. was regarded as an indispensable factor in maintaining Israel's national security. ■

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