

# **Victories on the Battlefield, Crushing Defeats in the Arena of Perception**

**Shaul Arieli • Head of the "T -Politography" Research Group**

**20:00 • May 20, 2025**

Haaretz

The war goals set by the government—dismantling Hamas and freeing the hostages—have become empty words. Only a few blind people still believe that Israel can achieve them. Israel continues to flounder in a war without political purpose, while increasing its hold on the Gaza Strip by expanding the buffer zone, building outposts and roads, and pushing Palestinians into half of the Strip's territory. At the same time, it is renewing humanitarian aid, managed by an American company and secured by the IDF.

Another undeclared goal of the war is to create a perception screen that will allow the messianic and nationalist government to achieve its ultimate goal—annexation moves in the West Bank and preparing conditions for renewed Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip.

The efforts to achieve the ultimate goal are accompanied by a lot of smoke and little fire. Bezalel Smotrich has managed to implement several tangible steps toward it, such as establishing a full apartheid regime by transferring civil authority from the military to his hands, channeling billions to settlements, budgeting for the construction of new bypass roads, building dozens of illegal outposts, proposing a law for Israel to implement an official land settlement in Judea and Samaria, demolishing Palestinian homes built without permits, and encouraging settler terrorism with a blind eye, if not backing, from the legal and security systems.

Alongside these tangible moves, propaganda efforts have taken place: separating 13 neighborhoods from parent settlements and declaring them independent settlements.

Most of the new outposts are grazing farms, which have a severe impact on Palestinians' daily lives—violence, expulsion of Palestinian communities, seizure of lands, and more. However, in terms of permanent settlement, the farms, where only a single family or a few hilltop youth live, have no demographic or spatial impact.

Against these real and imagined moves, Netanyahu's government's failures stand out: the migration balance in the West Bank is negative. In four of the last six years, more Israelis left the area than those who moved there from within the Green Line or Jews from abroad who came to the West Bank; the poverty rate, consisting entirely of the ultra-Orthodox population, has grown; the number of residents in Ma'ale Adumim, the third-largest city, has decreased; government subsidies have increased; young people have left, and more.

One "success," which is a foundational pillar of the government's nationalist-racist-messianic worldview, can be attributed to its "credit"—pushing Israel into the position of regional and global pariah, in accordance with the coalition's interpretation of Balaam's words, "Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations." Originally, this statement was interpreted as a promise that the people of Israel would not assimilate with the nations and would maintain their dignity, Jewish identity, and unique way of life. In the hands of the current government ministers, the verse has become an arrogant expression of Jewish superiority and complete contempt for the international community.

In a comprehensive study conducted by researchers of the "T- Politography" research group in recent years, it was found that Israel is losing its standing and image among regional countries, the US, the European Union, and world Jewry.

For a decade, the US relationship with Israel has undergone a deep systemic change with three characteristics: the gradual distancing of the US from direct involvement in attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2014 (the failure of John Kerry's mission), erosion of the traditional relationship foundations with Israel ("shared values"

and "strategic alliance"), and a consistent decline in support for the two-state solution, with a low point in references in 2024.

The European Union has related to Israel in a positive manner since the formation of the current government, considering its composition. After Yair Lapid's efforts as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister to rehabilitate relations after a "lost" decade, the European Union did not want to damage the delicate fabric of renewed relations. On October 7, the European Union stood unequivocally by Israel. However, in those days, a "multiplicity of voices" began regarding what was happening in Gaza. This multiplicity of voices, which has grown since then, typically paralyzes the European Union's ability to act in a unified and meaningful way against the government, even when it is accused of ethnic cleansing and genocide in Gaza and when the Prime Minister faces a warrant from the International Criminal Court.

Arab countries that maintain diplomatic and other relations with Israel and were once on the path to normalization have become hostile. The Israeli Palestinian arena continues to occupy a central place in the foreign policy of Arab countries. They still focus on calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and ending the occupation. All countries view the conflict as a source of regional instability and work to promote a settlement.

**We are witnessing a shift from almost unconditional American support to a more reserved approach and the distancing of moderate Arab countries**

Egypt, a cornerstone of regional peace, focuses on mediating between Israel and Hamas and strongly criticizes the effectiveness of the international community. It firmly opposes the Israeli law restricting UNRWA's activities and rejects the transfer ideas promoted by members of the Israeli government.

Jordan, our peace partner for almost three decades, has dramatically raised its level of criticism. It expresses special concern about Israel's policy in the West Bank and the Temple Mount, calling the war "barbaric" and accusing Israel of "ethnic cleansing."

Jordan's call for an arms embargo on Israel, which has continued for a second consecutive quarter, is unprecedented.

Saudi Arabia, which was on the path to normalization, now promotes an "Israel bypass route" and calls for international involvement that excludes Israel from the process. It strongly opposes Israeli measures against UNRWA and rejects any normalization with Israel until the war ends and the political process to establish a Palestinian state is renewed.

The United Arab Emirates, which led the Abraham Accords, now focuses on humanitarian aid to Gaza and criticizes the situation in the Strip. Its opposition to Israeli measures against UNRWA is prominent, and unlike in the past, there is a significant decrease in engagement with joint future plans.

Qatar, the central mediator, calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire and the opening of crossings, strengthens UNRWA with financial support of \$49 million, and accuses Israel of "genocide" and attempting to "exterminate the Palestinian people." Bahrain calls for convening an international peace conference and international recognition of a Palestinian state and offers unique educational initiatives in conflict zones.

The central trends across the Arab region are concerning: an organized attempt to create an "Israel bypass route," political and economic support for UNRWA in light of Israeli legislation, opposition to Israeli transfer ideas, and personalization of the conflict accompanied by personal criticism of Israeli leaders.

Turkey's policy has undergone a fundamental change, stemming from neo-Ottoman and pan-Islamic ideology, expressed in increasing support for Hamas and growing hostility toward Israel. Iran, which sponsors the entire ring of fire surrounding Israel, maintains its basic ideological position (denying Israel's existence), but its strategic priorities are changing. Urgent internal and external challenges are leading to a shift in Iranian focus away from the Palestinian issue. Despite the decrease in the intensity of statements,

Iran continues to support the "resistance" and emphasize that Israel has failed to achieve its war goals.

A dramatic change has also occurred in the positions of American Jewish organizations. AIPAC, which for years was the cornerstone of support for Israel, has reduced its support for the two-state solution to zero by 2025. The Anti-Defamation League has stopped supporting this solution, and the American Jewish Committee has almost completely abandoned the issue. Jewish Federations avoid addressing it, and only "J Street" raises a more critical voice.

The international legal reality is not encouraging either. The slow but steady progress toward annexation, led by Smotrich and supported by Netanyahu, is perceived as an irreversible process leading to apartheid, and from there to sanctions and boycotts.

Israel stands at a critical crossroads. We are witnessing a shift from almost unconditional American support to a more balanced and reserved approach, the distancing of moderate Arab countries, a deepening rift with American Jewry, and the strengthening of the Palestinian narrative in the international arena.

The conflict has not disappeared; it has only changed form. Even if Israel claims victories on the battlefield, it is suffering crushing defeats in the global arena of perception. In the absence of a clear policy and tangible steps toward a solution, Israel is leading itself into increasing isolation, which could severely damage its economic and political resilience in the coming years.