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Mohamad Hasan Sweidan

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Israel's overreach: The perils of ignoring power limits

Israel's prolonged multi-front aggression and its utter dependence on US support expose the perilous consequences of power overreach. Tel Aviv is left dangling in the wind with a sledgehammer, but no strategy to climb down.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

In the study of international relations, one of the most important threats to nations arises from an internal lack of awareness about their limits of power. A nation-state's power

projection is ultimately defined by key factors – military, economic, technological, diplomatic, and political reach – that are measurable and have inherent limitations.

This principle has led retired Israeli Colonel Gur Laish, former senior director for National Security Strategy at Israel's National Security Council, to issue a stark warning. In a [paper](#) published on 19 August by the Begin-Sadat Center for Israeli Strategic Studies, Laish cautions Israeli leaders against embracing a new security doctrine that overlooks its limitations.

Israel's strengths

Israel undeniably ranks among the world's most formidable [military powers](#), providing the occupation state with a strategic advantage over its regional adversaries. Its armed forces are ranked 15th globally and have received over \$130 billion in support from the US, its irreplaceable ally in international affairs.

Economically, Israel is also a significant player. In 2023, [The Economist](#) ranked Israel fourth among developed countries for economic success. The International Monetary Fund ([IMF](#)) estimated Israel's GDP to be \$564 billion and its per capita GDP to be \$58,270, putting it at 13th worldwide. Since its founding, Israel has received nearly [\\$330 billion](#) in foreign aid from the US, bolstering its economic dominance.

Technologically, Tel Aviv also stands out on the global stage. The [Global Innovation Index 2023](#) ranks Israel 14th out of 132 economies. Within the high-income group of 50 economies, Israel is ranked 13th and holds the top spot among 18 countries in North Africa and West Asia. The [Global Startup Ecosystem Index 2024](#) also ranks Israel third globally and first regionally, underscoring its technological prowess.

Diplomatically and politically, Israel benefits from unwavering US support, allowing it impunity from many international laws and norms. Washington has [used its veto power](#) in the UN Security Council 89 times, more than half of which have been to block resolutions critical of the occupation state.

Since [1945](#), out of 36 draft resolutions concerning Israel and Palestine, 34 were vetoed by the US, effectively shielding Israel from accountability for its actions. The US has also played a pivotal role in Israel's diplomatic achievements, including normalization agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) and, more recently, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco (2020), with ongoing efforts toward [Saudi-Israeli normalization](#).

Dependence on Washington: A double-edged sword

Israel's superiority in all these fields is closely tied to continuous US support, which also reveals a critical vulnerability. Dependence on Washington necessitates Israel's alignment

with western policies, which has led Israeli elites to caution against straining US–Israel relations.

Retired colonel Benina Sharvit Baruch highlights this point in an [article](#) for the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). She notes that Israel’s integration into the international system is under threat, especially in light of the ongoing Gaza war, which has significantly damaged its global standing. Baruch warns that failing to counteract this trend could further undermine Israel’s [spiraling economy](#), national security, and military objectives. Just last week, former ombudsman of the Israeli army, reserve General Yitzhak Brik, said the occupation entity “[faces collapse in less than a year](#)” if the war of attrition continues.

In another piece, the INSS also stresses that the [US-Israel strategic alliance](#) is contingent on shared values:

Israel’s strategic importance to the United States is relevant only as long as the shared values are safeguarded. At this time, the special relations are in danger, especially given the widening gaps on the perception of democracy, Israeli policy on the Palestinian issue, and the growing alienation between the American Jewish community and the State of Israel.

Indicators that Israel is reaching its limits

Beyond its dependency on US support, Israel’s military engagements, particularly in Gaza, have exposed the constraints of Tel Aviv’s power projection. Ten months into Israel’s brutal military assault on the besieged strip, the Palestinian resistance is still able to [target Tel Aviv](#).

History shows that states that ignore their limitations often face decline. In his seminal work, [Politics Among Nations](#), Hans Morgenthau argues for a balance between power and policy, warning that excessive force disrupts this equilibrium, leading to instability and potential decline.

Similarly, Paul Kennedy’s [The Rise and Fall of Great Powers](#) illustrates “imperial overstretch,” where ambitions exceed capabilities and precipitate decline. A recent example is the constrained ability of the US to support multiple fronts, evidenced by its diminished focus on Ukraine following the outbreak of the Gaza war.

Several indicators suggest that Israel, by continuing its war in Gaza, may be approaching the limits of its power. For starters, economic strain is becoming evident despite Israel’s historically strong economy. In the [last quarter of 2023](#), Israel’s GDP contracted by about 20 percent compared to the previous year.

There was also a significant decrease in consumption by 27 percent, and investment fell dramatically by 70 percent. The war has disabled approximately 18 percent of Israel's workforce, with 250,000 civilians displaced and four percent of the workforce called up as reservists.

In response, the occupation state plans to increase military spending from four percent to six or seven percent of GDP by the decade's end. This increase in military spending comes as the global economy is already under strain, and the US is less capable of providing the same financial support as in the past.

In addition to the economic strain, there has been a failure to achieve the military objectives outlined at the onset of the conflict. Last month, the [New York Times](#) reported that, despite ongoing military operations, the Israeli leadership is considering a ceasefire in Gaza that would leave Hamas in control.

This shift in strategy is seen as a concession, acknowledging that the complete destruction of Hamas, the war's primary goal, is not feasible. In June, Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari candidly admitted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's stated policy of eliminating Hamas was unrealistic, [describing](#) it as "throwing sand in the eye of the public" and adding:

Hamas is an idea. Anyone who thinks we can eliminate Hamas is wrong.

Concerns are also mounting over a [second major front with Lebanon](#), a development that has now become a reality. Since 8 October 2023, Tel Aviv has adopted a cautious strategy to avoid broadening the conflict, aware that its military forces are already heavily committed in Gaza.

'Boiling a frog'

In accordance with Iran's grand strategy, the prolonged conflict has [drained the Israeli military's resources](#), making it hesitant to engage in a new confrontation without significant US support. The deployment of US naval fleets in the region, intended to deter any potential response from Iran, Lebanon, or Yemen, highlights Israel's dependence on American military support. This dependency reveals Israel's current inability to manage [multiple fronts](#) independently.

Furthermore, Israel's heavy reliance on US support limits its autonomy and increases its vulnerability to shifts in American foreign policy. This dependency extends across economic, political, and military dimensions, further constraining Tel Aviv's ability to act independently.

This week, [Israel's Defense Ministry](#) announced that the US military has completed its 500th flight, airlifting over 50,000 tons of weapons and equipment to the occupation army. In addition to the reinforcements airlifted to Israel since 7 October, Washington has sent Tel Aviv 107 shipments of military supplies by sea.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah claimed in a speech late last year that Israel's munitions stock had been largely depleted in the first month of its Gaza assault and that the occupation army was almost entirely reliant on arms transfers from its allies, primarily the United States.

What would happen if that pipeline of weapons halted or if it suffered major production delays?

For Colonel Laish, Israel's traditional approach of rapid, decisive conflicts is being replaced by a strategy that accepts prolonged wars. This [new, high-risk strategy](#) promoted by Netanyahu could exceed Israel's capabilities, as the society, economy, and military are not equipped for sustained, drawn-out conflicts.

This shift, driven by a sense of invulnerability due to current levels of US support, has led to a decline in long-term planning.

As Stephen Walt, a Harvard University professor of international relations, writes in *Foreign Policy*, "the deepest problem facing Israel is the gradual erosion of Israeli strategic thinking over the past fifty years." Walt argues that one important factor in the decline of Israeli strategic thinking at the expense of tactical choices is "the sense of arrogance and impunity that stems from American protection and respect for Israel's wishes."

If the most powerful country in the world supports you no matter what you do, the need to think carefully about your actions will inevitably diminish.

Walt posits that Israel today, by prioritizing immediate tactical gains over strategic vision, faces a looming and resounding defeat. As it stands, the occupation state has yet to propose a realistic plan for Gaza's future or a strategy to address its regional adversaries, who are becoming increasingly emboldened.

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