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The Illusion of Dominance: Israel's Fragile Path to Peace

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SYNOPSIS

In the current Middle East geopolitical landscape, Israel holds a predominant position, sustained by overwhelming military power and ironclad US backing. However, this dominance is fragile as lasting security cannot rely solely on military strength but requires a broader approach that tackles the underlying grievances driving regional conflicts.

COMMENTARY

Israel's military supremacy in the Middle East faces no credible regional counterbalance. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq dismantled the country's governance and infrastructure, neutralising Iraq as a strategic threat to Israel. However, the collapse of Iraq's state apparatus created a power vacuum that spurred the rise of extremist groups like ISIS, which persist today. US-Iraqi military operations in 2024 will continue [targeting](#) these entrenched networks. The broader weakening of Arab states, such as Iraq, undermines their ability to counter militant terrorism and address escalating security challenges destabilising the region.

Israel has persistently targeted Syria over an extended period. An example is the 2007 "[Operation Orchard](#)", which resulted in the destruction of a suspected nuclear reactor in Deir ez-Zor. The Arab states have been passive in responding to Israeli attacks on Syria, which mirrors their stance on the war in Gaza and reflects shifting regional geopolitics. The Kuwait crisis undermined Arabism as a core ideological cornerstone, reducing it to a nominal presence within the Arab League – a "dead horse". Today, individual state interests outweigh collective Arab identity, explaining the incremental progress of peace agreements between Israel and Arab countries. In brief, given Syria's current debilitated state, it is incapable of defending itself, let alone constitute any credible threat to Israel.

Egypt is effectively constrained from challenging Israel due to several factors: (a) Its longstanding peace treaty with Israel, which faced uncertainty during the Muslim Brotherhood's rise in 2012 but was ultimately [reinforced](#) under its leadership. (b) The US\$1.3 billion in annual US military aid, critical amid Egypt's [economic crisis](#), ties Cairo to US regional priorities, particularly support for Israel. (c) The military is [woven into almost every part of Egypt's economy](#), with elite generals benefiting from loyalty-driven mechanisms under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, thereby undermining the military's institutional integrity and shifting it toward a "commercial army" less inclined to assert authority.

Arab states that maintain peace relations with Israel are driven by two primary interrelated incentives: [economic stability](#) and [regime survival](#). Pursuing economic stability and preventing unrest have become critical priorities for Arab regimes, particularly after the "Arab Spring". Recent uprisings across the region have increasingly been driven by [economic](#) grievances rather than ideological motivations, with rising prices of essential goods, especially [bread](#) – many uprisings in the Arab world are named "[bread riots](#)" – acting as key triggers. Historically, such protests tend to subside when basic commodity prices stabilise, highlighting the central role of economic factors in sustaining social stability.

The Gulf monarchies have demonstrated a pragmatic approach to *Realpolitik*, marked by a strategic pivot from the traditional Arab regional order, particularly in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Kuwait crisis. This pivotal event underscored the vulnerabilities of regional alliances and the inadequacies of pan-Arab solidarity, prompting these states to [recalibrate](#) their foreign policies. In embracing a more pragmatic stance, Gulf monarchies sought closer ties with global powers, notably the United States, to ensure their security and economic stability. Furthermore, they [diversified](#) their alliances, fostering discreet yet strategic relationships with Israel and prioritising economic modernisation over ideological commitments.

This shift reflects a broader trend in Gulf politics, where survival [strategies are rooted](#) in adaptability and leveraging geopolitical opportunities rather than adhering to traditional pan-Arabist frameworks.

It addresses the question of how far Israel can go in asserting regional dominance. Israel is a strategic component of the regional order but does not dominate solely due to its current military capabilities. Instead, two factors underpin its position: first, the historical outcomes of wars between Arab states and Israel, where Israel decisively defeated Arab armies on multiple occasions, and second, the deep-seated mistrust among Arab regimes, whose primary unifying concern remains regime security and survival.

The Gulf states represent a distinct case, having integrated millions of Arab workers into their economies over decades through labour migration. According to the [International Labour Organization](#), Saudi Arabia alone hosts approximately 2.5 million Egyptians, alongside significant numbers from Sudan, Yemen, and Jordan. This economic interdependence bolstered workers' home economies but was disrupted by Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Yasser Arafat's [support](#) for Saddam Hussein during the crisis created a historic rift between Kuwait and the Palestinian people, with approximately 380,000 Palestinians residing in Kuwait at the time. This, combined with

seeing one Arab country invading another, deepened mistrust and reshaped Arab politics.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Israel's predominance in the Middle East is due not only to its military superiority and unquestionable US support but also to many other reasons. The question is whether peace between a strong Israel and its weaker regional counterparts is sustainable or possible. Based on current dynamics, the answer is yes, grounded in several factors. The relative stability and inaction of Arab states in response to conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria suggest that peace, at least through agreements, is achievable. However, major factors challenge its durability.

First, military dominance alone cannot secure enduring peace. This is evident in regional and global histories. The Six-Day War (1967), where Israel's victory failed to resolve tensions and led to the Yom Kippur War (1973), which, despite initial military gains for Egypt, resulted in prolonged instability; the Iraq War (2003–2011), which toppled Saddam Hussein but fostered insurgency and sectarian violence; and the Gaza Conflicts (2008, 2012, 2014), where Israeli military campaigns perpetuated cycles of violence.

Second, a weak state or nation lacks the capacity to establish lasting peace. Weak states often accept unfavourable peace terms and, therefore, are inherently unable to sustain and implement agreements, as exemplified by the fragile outcomes of the Oslo Accords, which were negotiated with a politically and economically weakened Palestinian Authority, and the instability of subsequent regional negotiations.

Global history further illustrates that weak states often fail to establish robust peace. The Weimar Republic (1919–1933), plagued by political and economic instability, could not prevent the rise of extremism, leading to World War II. Afghanistan's post-Taliban government (2001–2021) lacked the institutional influence to maintain peace or counter insurgencies despite extensive international aid. The Vietnam War (1955–1975), where US military dominance could not prop up the corrupt and weak South Vietnamese government, let alone sustained peace, and the Korean War (1950–1953), which resulted in an armistice but no lasting peace agreements to date.

The prospects for peace between Israel and the Palestinians remain feasible, provided that key destabilising factors are addressed. These include proxies, militant groups, terrorist organisations, underground networks, factions, dissatisfied Arab populations discontented with Israel's actions in Gaza, transnational insurgent groups, ideological extremists, and the broader Arab public opinion, which continues to be shaped by historical grievances and ongoing regional tensions. Achieving peace requires sidelining or neutralising these entities and issues while addressing the underlying concerns of the wider Arab public to create a stable and conducive environment for reconciliation. It is a tall order, but the alternative is continuing war and destruction.

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