



Israel's Foreign Relations Strain under War with Hamas

Michał Wojnarowicz

Israel's diplomacy in the wake of the 7 October Hamas attack has focused on mobilising support from foreign partners and engaging in information outreach vis-à-vis world public opinion. The effectiveness of these efforts is being diminished by the external pressure on Israel over the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the growing number of casualties from the military intervention, as well as the inconsistent messaging from the Israeli authorities. The current escalation may lead to changes in some of Israel's bilateral relations.

Israel's Wartime Diplomacy. In the first phase of its latest war against Hamas, Israel received broad political support from most of its partners among the EU and [NATO](#) countries. The presidents of the [U.S.](#), France, and Romania, the heads of government from Germany, the [UK](#), and Czechia, [and EU officials](#), among others, made official visits in solidarity. At the same time, the support Israel has received has not translated into a strengthening of its position in multilateral forums such as the UN.

Israel has launched an extensive information campaign aimed at the public, media, and foreign leaders. The focus is on the details of [the 7 October Hamas terrorist operation](#), primarily the scale of the [atrocities committed during the attacks](#). An integral part of this message is equating Hamas' actions to those of ISIS, as well as references to World War II and the Holocaust. The second most significant aspect is the issue of hostages, including many foreigners, held in Gaza. Demands for their release are a crucial element of pro-Israel demonstrations around the world, often supported by Israeli diplomacy. Israel is also diplomatically engaged in combating anti-Israel disinformation, countering pro-Palestinian voices, and responding to the very high rise in antisemitic sentiment and events around the world.

The siege of the Gaza Strip and the [entry of Israeli ground forces](#) changed the conditions of news coverage, with more references to the military's activities (e.g., embedding journalists in reporting from the Strip). For world public opinion and foreign partners, [the situation of civilians in the Gaza Strip](#) has become the primary focal point. The growing

scale of casualties (Hamas authorities put the number at around 15,000 dead), the critical humanitarian situation, including minimal aid supplies and colder weather, and the destruction of infrastructure are generating increasing international criticism of Israel and accusations of deliberate use of collective responsibility or acquiescence to the disproportionate civilian losses. Mobilisation of pro-Palestinian protests worldwide, which have been more numerous and frequent than pro-Israel demonstrations, remains high.

The effectiveness of the Israeli actions is also affected by the inconsistency in the positions of the [unity government led by Benjamin Netanyahu](#). Israel still has not articulated a clear vision for the future of the Gaza Strip, including management of it after Hamas is presumably dismantled. Netanyahu has repeatedly decried the need for Israel to maintain the possibility of a military response in the Strip, which would make it difficult for international forces, for example, to operate there, and has questioned the possibility of a return of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. The credibility of the Israeli position is undermined by statements from coalition politicians, most often associated with the extreme-right. Particularly problematic for Israel's external partners is the rhetoric used by some members of the government, which include calls for the permanent resettlement of Palestinians outside of the Gaza Strip.

Damaged Relations. Criticism of the tactics used in Gaza so far and the issue of hostages and foreign citizens in the Strip—Israel is also coordinating their evacuation—are

PISM BULLETIN

influencing changes in attitudes in countries that initially took a very favourable stance towards Israel, such as France. Key for Israel is U.S. policy and involvement. Despite the maintenance of an unequivocally pro-Israeli position and high levels of materiel support, there is a growing rift between the Netanyahu government and the Biden administration over the current situation and vision of the future of Gaza, including American opposition to military reoccupation. The U.S. criticism has intensified because of increasing conflicts in the West Bank, in particular attacks by Jewish settlers against Palestinians. In such cases, Israel traditionally seeks allies in the U.S. Congress to counter criticism from the presidential administration.

The war against Hamas is affecting the prospects for Israel's relations with countries in the region. For Arab states, [despite their differing attitudes toward Hamas and the difficulty in formulating a common position](#), the Palestinian issue has returned as a significant focal point in current politics. Given the scale of the Israeli military operations in Gaza, maintaining official relations with the country is increasingly becoming a political burden. An expression of opposition to the Israeli operation in the Palestinian territories was the withdrawal from Israel of the ambassadors of Bahrain and Jordan, which also declared the cancellation of a [tripartite energy agreement](#). Under the influence of harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric, the rebuilding of [relations with Turkey](#), which also withdrew its ambassador, came to a halt. Some countries have so far refrained from unfriendly gestures, [notably Saudi Arabia](#), with which Israel is counting on the continuation of the [normalisation of relations](#) and support, for example, in the [context of pressure on Iran](#).

[Israel's relations with Russia](#) have weakened as the Russian government [did not condemn the 7 October attack](#) and maintains a [political dialogue with Hamas](#). Adding to the strain are antisemitic attitudes in Russia itself, prevalent in media coverage, among other expressions. Of particular concern were incidents in the North Caucasus in October, including an attempted attack on Israelis thought to be traveling through the airport in Makhachkala, Russia. The Israeli authorities also take a negative view of [China's attitude towards the conflict](#). The actions taken in Gaza weaken Israel's position in the countries of the Global South. In the long term, this could negatively affect the Israeli economy, which in many sectors [depends on foreign labour](#), for example, workers from Southeast Asia. Beyond criticising the withdrawal of diplomatic representatives by South Africa, Chad, and several Latin American countries (in the

case of Bolivia, a full cut-off of relations), Israel is not currently pursuing a proactive policy to improve relations.

Conclusions and Outlook. The current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict weakens Israel's diplomatic capabilities. Although Israel declares that it will pursue the goals it has set for itself regardless of external opinion, its authorities will be forced to confront international criticism over the situation in Gaza to a greater extent. It will become increasingly difficult for them to obtain the desired support. This increases the effectiveness of external diplomatic pressure, from the U.S., for example, to accommodate some demands concerning issues such as humanitarian needs, but this will generate additional tensions within the Israeli government. At the same time, Israel also will try to a greater extent to engage with its closest allies that have a stable pro-Israel stance to support its political goals. It did this with [India in the BRICS forum](#), as well as with [Hungary](#) and [Czechia](#) in the context of EU policy, among others. The ceasefire and prisoner exchange that began on 24 November, on the one hand, was a response to some of the external pressure (e.g., on humanitarian issues), but on the other, exposed Israel to additional pressure to extend the truce, a step rejected by the Israeli authorities.

In the long term, the reactions of individual states to the 7 October Hamas attack and the kind of support Israel has received since the beginning of the current escalation may become a benchmark for future bilateral cooperation. The chances of establishing new [normalisation agreements](#) are for now severely limited, and if opportunities arise (e.g., with Saudi Arabia), they will be more inclusive of the Palestinian issue. At the same time, despite disappointment with the attitude of some of its partners, it is unlikely that Israel will initiate changes in the nature of relations with, for example, Russia. In the context of relations with Poland, Israeli diplomacy is pushing for an increased dimension of political support. At the same time, Poland calls for greater cooperation in the evacuation of Polish citizens from Gaza. Israel also perceives Poland's policy as contrasting with the attitudes of other countries in the region, which are among the most pro-Israeli in the EU.

Sustained support by EU countries for Israel in confronting Hamas should be accompanied by consistent pressure on the Israeli authorities to expand humanitarian aid and greater protection for civilians in the Palestinian territories. This pressure should also include the formulation of clear proposals on the part of Israel regarding the political future of the Gaza Strip, ruling out any scenarios of forcing the emigration of the Palestinian people and restricting [their rights to self-determination](#).