

# GREAT DECISIONS

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## Background guide: Israel

### Overview

Modern Israel was created as a safe haven for Jews after the Holocaust, but conflict with Palestinians already living there thrust the region into a decades-long conflict.

The U.S. stepped in as its top ally, offering Israel a “special relationship.” Due to the countries’ shared values and Washington’s need for a strategic ally in the Middle East, America has continued to provide unparalleled military and diplomatic support.

But now, those ties are being tested. The Arab Spring, the Obama administration’s nuclear negotiations with Iran, and Israel’s own decision to give Washington the cold shoulder have put new strains on the 65-year-old partnership.

### Zionism and Israel’s Founding

Modern political Zionism arose in the post-Enlightenment era in Europe. It is commonly viewed as being fathered by Jewish journalist Theodore Herzl. In 1896, Herzl published *Der Judenstaat* (“The Jewish State”), where he proposed the establishment of an independent Jewish state. Herzl’s solution to poor treatment of Jews in Europe—the so-called “Jewish question”—hinged on self-determination, not assimilation. A year after the publication of *Der Judenstaat*, the First Zionist Congress, chaired by Herzl, met in Basel, Switzerland to draw up the movement’s manifesto, later known as the Basel Program.

Most importantly, modern Zionism as espoused by Herzl was secular, rooted in Western European notions of “nationhood,” not messianic, in nature.

To build such a movement on secular grounds, Jews need to be perceived as a separate nation—the “Jewish people”—with a unified historical narrative. Both “separateness” and the lack thereof, plagued European Jews, who were either forced to totally assimilate or forced into separate communities. Herzl and like-minded Jewish intellectuals believed assimilation had failed, and that the answer was a self-governing Jewish state.

The latter narrative was not difficult to come by. The phrase “next year in Jerusalem” was part of the Passover ritual, and a yearning to return to Zion was not just in the Torah, but also appeared in modern literature and artwork. Ending exile from the holy land was a laudable goal—the real question lay in whether it was achieved through the coming of the messiah or through migration.

Jews began migrating to Palestine in waves, and in 1948 David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of Israel, which would become an independent state after the expiration of the British

Mandate for Palestine.

Just a day after Ben-Gurion declared Israel’s independence, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War broke out.

### A friendship with deep roots on the rocks

Since Israel’s founding in 1948, no one has given more support to the country than the United States. Decades of strong diplomatic and military backing continue even today—as both sides of a bitterly divided Congress support the relationship.

But recently that bond has been shaken. Like many world leaders, President Obama has put pressure on Israel to craft a “two-state solution” to the Palestinian conflict—an agreement to essentially share the land between both sides.

But in 2010, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took a big step in the other direction—expanding settlements on Palestinian land, despite American warnings. The move cooled ties with Washington for several years.

Now, in President Obama’s second term, things seem to be back on track. Secretary of State John Kerry has made a number of trips to the region, and both sides of the conflict have agreed to some sort of “two-state solution.” Kerry now appears optimistic about breaking the impasse over settlements.

### Israel’s new neighborhood

After years of violent conflict in the region, in 1978 Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David Accords. Brokered by Jimmy Carter, the agreement ended a war and settled the boundaries between Israel and Egypt though it left the question of East Jerusalem unsettled.

But recent events are threatening the decades of relative stability surrounding Israel. To its west, the Arab Spring has given rise to uprisings, overturning governments and unleashing instability on the region.

To its north, the Syrian conflict threatens to spill over to the entire region. Regional factions like Hezbollah are already joining in a conflict they see as Sunni versus Shia.

And to its east, Israel is ever wary of Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Though Iran claims its pursuits are peaceful, it’s hard for Israel to trust a nation whose former leader’s hostile rhetoric continues to overshadow current relations. Those fears have nudged Israel to diverge from President Obama’s proposed plans with Iran.

### Policy Options

Despite icy relationships between its leaders, Israel and the U.S.

are inextricably linked. The U.S. is Israel's top trading partner, and the nations share many of the same values and interests.

The U.S. now wants its ally to engage in a series of new talks with Palestinians—what it calls “confidence building measures.” These small agreements would build trust between the two groups, laying the groundwork for a more permanent solution.

It's a clever idea, but one that may gain little traction—at least as long as the rest of the region confronts an uncertain political future.

### Expert List

Peter Beinart, *Associate professor of journalism and political science at City University of New York (CUNY), senior political writer for The Daily Beast*

Steven A. Cook, *Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations*

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Sadika Hameed, *Fellow, Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies*

Daniel Levy, *Director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at the European Council on Foreign Relations*

Rashid Khalidi, *American historian of the Middle East, Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University*

John Mearsheimer, *Political theorist and co-author of The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*

Carol Migdalovitz, *Congressional Research Service specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs*

Michael B. Oren, *former Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Israeli historian and author*

Barry Rubin, *Middle East expert and author of Israel: An Introduction*

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Jonathan Tepperman, *Managing Editor of Foreign Affairs*

Stephen M. Walt, *Professor, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and co-author of The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*

### Quick Facts

Israel's founding was preceded by more than 50 years of efforts to establish a sovereign state as a homeland for Jews.

U.S. security assistance to Israel acknowledges strong bilateral ties and reflects the unshakable commitment of the United States to Israel's security. Annually, the U.S. provides Israel \$3.1 billion in security assistance.

Despite strong international pressure, President Obama vetoed the

2010 Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement construction – making the U.S. the only country on the 15-member Security Council not to support the resolution.

Israel is a republic with a parliamentary democracy headed by the president as the titular head of state. Executive power wielded by prime minister and cabinet ministers representing dominant political blocs in Knesset, to which they are collectively responsible.

Traditional Judaism has been playing a more dominant role since the late 1960s and affecting more of the political and economic dimensions of everyday life.

The 1917 Balfour Declaration asserted the British government's support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Palestine became a British mandate following the end of World War I (1914-1918).

President Obama worked with Congress to pass the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010, the most far-reaching package of American sanctions against Iran, which makes it harder for the Iranian government to buy refined petroleum and the goods it needs to modernize its oil and gas sector.