

Israel: Confronting Challenges and Reaping Success

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From the moment of its independence, the State of Israel has confronted seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Nevertheless, today it is home to one of the world's most dynamic democracies, thriving economies, and innovative societies. Israel enjoys excellent relations with numerous nations across the globe, peace treaties with two of its Arab neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, and an unshakable alliance with the United States.

Still, as 2011 approaches, Israel continues to face immediate threats to its security and a global assault on its legitimacy. Terrorist organizations— Hamas in Gaza and, in Lebanon, Hezbollah—have in recent years fired thousands of rockets at Israeli towns and villages. A thousand Israelis have been killed by suicide bombers and many thousands more maimed. Iran, the chief backer of these terrorists, is meanwhile striving to produce nuclear weapons—a project which, if completed, would enable President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to act on his declaration to “wipe Israel off the map.” A nuclear Iran could further facilitate Iranian efforts to transfer massively destructive weapons to terrorist groups while triggering a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Along with these military threats, Israel confronts campaigns to deny it the right to defend itself, even the right to exist. Efforts to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel—known collectively by the initials BDS—aim to isolate Israel internationally and render it vulnerable to attack.

In spite of these challenges, Israel remains unwaveringly committed to the peace process. Since assuming office in March of 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for direct talks with the Palestinian Authority under President Mahmoud Abbas. Israel seeks a peace arrangement in which Israel, recognized as the nation state of the Jewish people, lives side-by-side with an effectively demilitarized Palestinian state. To that end, Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered a ten-month freeze of new construction in the West Bank settlements—an act described by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as “unprecedented”—and removed hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints in the West Bank, contributing to the West Bank's remarkable eight percent growth rate. The Prime Minister welcomed the renewal of direct peace talks, without preconditions, with the Palestinians on September 2, 2010, and reiterated his readiness to discuss all the core issues: borders, Jerusalem, refugees, and security. Israel's goal is to achieve a definitive, legitimate and permanent peace with the Palestinians and the entire Arab world.

Over the past year Israel has also seen many triumphs. Recognized as a world leader in the fields of biotechnology, alternative energy, and telecommunications, and with an annual growth rate of 4.7 percent, Israel received membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Israel's economic partnerships with both China and India meanwhile continue to thrive. Boasting four of the world's top 150 universities, Israel has more start-up companies, scientific papers, technical patents, and Nobel Prizes per capita than any other nation, and is second only to the United States in terms of companies

represented on the NASDAQ exchange. Tourism rates to Israel this year are at an all-time high.

At sixty-two years old, Israel's democracy is older than more than half of the democracies in the world. In the face of unrelenting pressures and threats, Israel is one of the few democracies never to have experienced interregna of non-democratic rule. Arab citizens, representing some 20 percent of the population, are represented in the Knesset—Israel's parliament—as well as on Israel's Supreme Court. Demonstrations and picket lines attest to continuing efforts to ensure absolute equality between all Israelis—Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, new immigrants and native-born Israelis—but also to the vibrancy and freedom of Israeli society.

Israel this year faces monumental tasks: to work with the international community to deter Iran from building nuclear weapons, to achieve a lasting peace with the Palestinians, and to continue to expand economically in spite of the global recession. Drawing on its traditions, the robustness of its people, and the strength of its democratic system, Israel has met and surmounted similar challenges in the past. The path ahead will likely not be smooth, but its end might yet bring security, prosperity, and peace to Israel and to all its neighbors.