

How Israel Expands Its Influence Through Minority Alliances



In the tangled web of Middle Eastern conflicts, Israel does not rely solely on direct military confrontations or political showdowns with its adversaries. Instead, it deploys a more subtle yet profoundly strategic approach: expanding its sphere of influence by forging alliances with non-Arab states and religious or ethnic minorities that surround its principal rivals.

This approach—now entrenched in Israeli political discourse as the “Periphery Doctrine”—emerged alongside the birth of the Israeli state in 1948 as a means to overcome the geographic and political isolation imposed by hostile Arab neighbors.

Far from being a temporary foreign policy strategy, the doctrine became integral to Israel’s national security thinking. It was designed not merely to escape isolation, but to exploit subnational identities within Arab countries, build covert networks of influence, and infiltrate the internal structures of rival states.

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In the aftermath of Israel’s 1948 declaration of independence, the fledgling state found itself encircled by hostile Arab coalitions. Lacking strategic depth and

adequate human resources, it faced daunting challenges.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, responded with a dual-pronged doctrine: secure overwhelming military superiority with Western backing and forge alliances with non-Arab states in the region to break out of its encirclement and neutralize the Arab threat.

Thus was born the "Periphery Doctrine"—a foreign policy predicated on rapprochement with non-Arab Muslim countries like Turkey, pre-revolutionary Iran, and Ethiopia. The doctrine rested on the belief that these states shared with Israel a common fear of Arab nationalism and Nasserite expansionism, making cooperation mutually beneficial.

Israeli scholar Baruch Uziel was the first to publicly articulate the doctrine in his 1956 book *The Alliance of the Periphery: A Suggested Policy for Israel*, drawing parallels between Israel's strategy and the U.S. containment policy toward the Soviet Union. He proposed forming clandestine alliances with peripheral states to counter the Arab nationalist project led by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Drawing from declassified Israeli documents, researcher Jean Semaan revealed that Tel Aviv coordinated militarily and in intelligence matters with both Turkey and Iran. Israel even backed Ankara during the Cyprus crisis, in direct opposition to Nasser's support for Greek Cypriot separatists.

Israel and Turkey also viewed the short-lived Egyptian-Syrian union (1958–1961) as a common threat, particularly as it placed trained Egyptian troops at their borders—further affirming the necessity of the Periphery Doctrine.

Over the decades, the doctrine became a cornerstone of Israel's regional security strategy, particularly in its dealings with ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab world.

A Renewed Doctrine for a New Era

The Periphery Doctrine, originally shaped by Ben-Gurion, has not remained static. It has evolved significantly in response to shifting global and regional dynamics over the past few decades.

This evolution is not solely the result of changing Arab alignments or new adversaries. Rather, it reflects a deliberate recalibration by Israel's security establishment to adapt the old doctrine to the post-Cold War and post-Arab Spring era, ensuring Israel's continued dominance in a volatile region.

In a revealing interview with Yedioth Ahronoth, former Israeli intelligence officer David Ben Uziel outlined what he described as the "updated Periphery Doctrine," now built on two key pillars:

The First Belt: Fueling conflicts between Arab states and their non-Arab neighbors—such as Turkey and Iran—to weaken regional powers and divert their resources toward internal and peripheral battles. These proxy conflicts dilute support for the Palestinian cause and fracture Arab unity, ultimately easing strategic pressure on Israel.

The Second Belt: Exploiting ethnic and religious minorities—especially those near or within Israel—by isolating them from their surrounding societies and binding their security and political interests to Israel. Through fear or marginalization, these groups become natural allies to Tel Aviv.

This strategic transformation resonates with the critique offered by Egyptian intellectual Abdel Wahab El-Messiri in his seminal encyclopedia *Jews, Judaism and Zionism*. El-Messiri argued that Zionism rests on two core principles:

Balkanization: Fragmenting Arab countries into smaller, quarreling entities that are easier to manipulate.

Economic Integration: Tying neighboring states' economies to Israel's, creating dependency and consolidating long-term influence.

According to El-Messiri, Israel divides the Arab world into four geopolitical circles, with a tailored policy for each to preserve its superiority amid regional instability.

For instance, the first circle includes the Fertile Crescent—Syria, Iraq, and Jordan—where Israel envisions Syria splintered into sectarian and ethnic statelets: an Alawite coastal enclave, Sunni regions in the north and south, and a Druze entity in the Golan. This mirrors Israel's long-term strategy to dismantle Syria from within.

Similarly, El-Messiri noted Israel's view of Iraq as a candidate for division into three distinct entities: a Shiite state in the south, a Sunni one in the center, and a Kurdish one in the north—with oil wealth kept under strict control to prevent any faction from gaining regional clout.

As for Lebanon, Israel sees it as an inherently fragile state suitable for partition into five sectarian zones, reflecting its historical weakness and fragmented national identity.

The second circle encompasses Egypt and Sudan. Here, Israel's focus lies in eroding Egypt's historical and symbolic leadership of the Arab world by stoking sectarian tensions, undermining the state's coherence, and steering it toward the model of a failed or weakened state lacking strategic agency.

Israel's Renewed Bet on Minorities

The fall of the Syrian regime and the emergence of a new regional alliance—including Syria, Turkey, and the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia—has reignited Israeli concerns over the restoration of Syrian centrality and regional cohesion. In response, Israel is reconsidering the revival of its long-standing alliance with regional minorities—a foundational tenet of its original security doctrine.

In a notable speech delivered after the war in Lebanon and the collapse of the Syrian regime, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar declared, “In a region where we will always be a minority, we can form natural alliances with other minorities.”

He called on Israel to strengthen ties with Kurds and other regional minorities—describing them as “natural allies”—while specifically urging greater engagement with the Druze in Syria and Lebanon.

This line of thinking is far from new. Historically, Israel has sought to penetrate its Arab surroundings by supporting minorities: backing southern Sudanese Christians, cultivating close ties with the Druze, coordinating with Lebanese Maronites, and fostering strong relations with Iraqi Kurds since the 1960s.

Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani visited Israel twice, in 1968 and 1973, following military, logistical, and training support from Tel Aviv and Tehran (under the Shah) as part of a tripartite alliance against Iraq.

Following the fall of the Syrian regime, Israel wasted no time in reactivating these channels. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly addressed the Druze in Syria, declaring, “First and foremost, we extend a hand of peace to our Druze brothers in Syria, who are kin to our Israeli Druze citizens.”

The Druze: Vanguard of the Periphery Doctrine

Since Israel’s founding, its Zionist elite—led by Ben-Gurion—sought to reengineer the social fabric of Palestinian Arabs by fragmenting their sectarian and ethnic identity and co-opting certain groups as internal security assets.

In this strategy, the Druze played a pivotal role. Granted a special legal status, they were made subject to mandatory military service in 1956—a duty from which Muslims and Christians were exempt.

This policy was not merely administrative; it laid the foundation for what became known in Israeli security literature as the “Blood Pact”—a symbolic and practical alliance rooted in the notion that the Druze differ from other Arabs and are thus more trustworthy partners.

According to a study titled *Forging a Zionized Minority Identity: The Druze Case in Israel*, the 1950s witnessed not just a military arrangement but a full-fledged

campaign to redefine Druze identity within Israel, severing their connection to the broader Arab world. Israeli scholar Gabriel Ben-Dor underscored this perspective, asserting that “the Druze are not Arabs in the political sense,” and therefore more reliable than any other community.

This outlook has reemerged in recent years amid escalating tensions in Syria’s Suwayda province. Israeli Druze leaders—chief among them Sheikh Mowafaq Tarif—have openly supported armed Druze factions in Syria and criticized the Israeli government for what they saw as a betrayal of the Blood Pact.

In an unusual response, Israel launched airstrikes on Syrian army positions in Suwayda, later expanding them to include the Syrian General Staff headquarters in Damascus—a dramatic show of support for the Druze factions.

It is now evident that Israel’s minority alliance strategy has evolved far beyond political containment. It now involves direct military and operational partnerships, with minority groups—especially the Druze—serving as frontline instruments in the updated implementation of the Periphery Doctrine.

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