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Israel Isn't Isolated

[Gabriel Scheinmann](#)

Following the reaction to Israel's bevy of construction announcements late last year, one would assume that Israel's right-wing, settlement-crazed government had, once more, managed to thumb its nose at the world and deepen Israel's already-perilous pariah position. It had just received international support during Operation Pillar of Defense and the Obama administration's backing in opposing the Palestinian statehood bid at the UN. Yet Israel not only announced construction in East Jerusalem and the large settlement blocks, but also advanced zoning plans in E-1, a barren, 4.6 square mile area that connects Jerusalem to Maale Adumim. Condemnation was instant and global. Israeli ambassadors were upbraided across Europe. The Swedish Foreign Minister went so far as to say [that](#) "what the Israelis did on E1 has shifted opinions in Europe," while the Obama administration said the construction would be "damaging" to a two-state solution and that it shared the same sentiment as its European allies, which had condemned Israel vociferously. Meanwhile, Time magazine [dubbed](#) 2012 "The Year of the Israeli Settlement" and the New York Times [called](#) Netanyahu's plans "disturbing," saying that it furthered Israel's isolation.

But once the hysteria dissipates, it becomes obvious that Israel is far from the isolated and cast-off state it is made out to be. On the contrary, Israel is actually at the height of its global integration, increasingly enmeshed across diplomatic, economic and cultural fronts. Settlement construction may indeed spark outrage in European capitals and angst in the White House, but it has not stood in the way of Israel's greater inclusion in the global economy and international institutions, as well as increased normalized diplomatic relations.

Historically, Israel was most isolated during the Cold War, as the entire Soviet-backed Eastern Bloc, save Ceausescu's Romania, did not have relations with the Jewish State. As if that wasn't enough, neither did China, India, or Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). To top it off, following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, nearly the entirety of sub-Saharan Africa suspended relations with Jerusalem under pressure from the Arab oil embargo. During the 1980s, outside a few exceptions, Israel only had full diplomatic relations with the United States, Canada, Latin America and Western Europe. Even then, it did not have relations with Spain until 1986 or full diplomatic relations with Greece, which was the sole European country to vote against Partition in 1947, until 1990. Relations with the Vatican weren't established until 1994.

The end of the Cold War provided an immediate and massive improvement in Israel's diplomatic position. Israel was able to establish embassies in the entire former Soviet space, from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus to Central Asia, as well as in China, India, and sub-Saharan Africa. Since 1989, Israel has established full diplomatic relations with nearly 70 countries and has peace treaties with two immediate neighbors, Egypt and Jordan. Today, the only non-Muslim majority countries that do not have relations with Israel are the Chavez-led bloc (Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua), Bhutan and North Korea. Although some Arab countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Oman, Qatar and Mauritania) have indeed closed budding Israeli trade offices or interests sections opened in the wake of the Oslo Accords, the evidence overwhelmingly affirms that Israel has both greater and deeper diplomatic relations now than it has ever had.

Even under the Netanyahu government, Israel has become more integrated into the workings of international institutions. For the first time last year, Israel [became](#) a member of the executive board of the UN Development Program, was recently [elected](#) to the executive board of UNICEF for the first time in 40 years, and its ambassador to the UN was [elected](#) [8] to be a vice president of the UN General Assembly. In a real stunner, a 2011 UN panel of inquiry into the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla incident [affirmed](#) [9] that Israel's blockade of Gaza was both legitimate and legal. Although Israel's inability to gain much Western support against the successful Palestinian bid to upgrade its status to that of a non-member observer state (same status as the Vatican) was certainly a diplomatic setback—the actual vote was never in question due to the dominance of OIC countries in the GA—Israel is slowly but surely becoming more integrated into the UN machinery.

Similarly, despite near-automatic condemnation of Israel's supposed quick resort to military force, many states continue both to conduct military exercises with Israeli forces and to purchase arms from the Jewish State. In the past year alone, Israel has conducted military exercises with Greece, Poland, and Italy in addition to the largest joint military exercise in Israel's history with the United States, dubbed Austere Challenge 2012. [Romanian](#) and [Finnish air force chiefs](#) paid visits to Jerusalem and [Indian](#) and [Chinese](#) warships made ports of call at Haifa. Moreover, Israel clinched major arms deals with Singapore, Colombia, India, Italy, and [Azerbaijan](#)—a Shiite Muslim country bordering Iran; Israel regularly sells systems to Finland, the Netherlands, Australia, and Brazil. In addition to its extraordinarily close military relationship with the United States, with annual joint exercises, co-proprietary missile defense programs, and officer exchanges, Israel bonds with the armed forces of other nations are only multiplying.

The Israeli economy is also at a high-point of global integration. In 2010, it was admitted into the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development), a 34-member club of Western-oriented countries committed to democracy and the free market. Israeli [exports](#) and [imports](#) were at all-time highs in 2012, [trade with China](#) and India grow annually at double-digit rates, and the EU remains Israel's largest trading partner, accounting for around 30 percent of Israel's total trade. Just this past October, the EU and Israel [ratified](#) the ACAA (Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of industrial products), meaning that the EU now certifies Israeli industrial standards as equal to European ones, easing the import, for example, of Israeli pharmaceutical products, which are already [the 5th largest source for the EU](#). Israel has also signed several groundbreaking, potentially multi-billion dollar gas deals with Cyprus and Greece. In the next year, Israel likely will become the [first non-European member of CERN](#), the Geneva-based physics organization, and will ratify an ["Open Skies" agreement with the EU](#), which will allow both European and Israeli airlines to operate direct flights between any of their cities. Lastly, [2012 was a record year for tourists](#) flocking to Israel, as the unraveling of the Arab revolts has cast Israel as an oasis of calm. Perhaps the definition of "isolation" should be changed.

By any measure, the last several years have been a high-point of Israeli integration into the international community. Trade, tourism, and military exchanges are booming and Israel has been admitted into several prestigious international organizations. It was even recognized by

South Sudan, weeks after the latter's independence, and hosted South Sudanese president Salva Kiir a few months later.

While there is no doubt that Europe, the Obama Administration, and the mainstream media have an ingrained indisposition towards Israeli settlement construction, Israel's international diplomatic, military, and economic standing in the world have only been strengthened over the past two decades. Perhaps this conundrum is best exemplified by the July 2012 visit to Israel of José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, who, in the same speech in which he expressed concern over continued settlement building, [said it best](#): “a continent such as Europe, that invests heavily in innovation, needs to have close links with a ‘start-up nation’, like Israel.”

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