

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Israel as a “Crazy” State

 Ian Lustick 

Bess W. Heyman Chair Emeritus, Political Science Department, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

**Correspondence:** Ian Lustick ([ilustick@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:ilustick@sas.upenn.edu); [ilustick@gmail.com](mailto:ilustick@gmail.com))

**Received:** 29 April 2025 | **Accepted:** 14 July 2025

**Keywords:** *Crazy States* | Dror | Gaza | Israel | palestinians | peace | radicalization

## ABSTRACT

On March 14, 2025, the guest editor of this special issue, Alon Ben-Meir, conducted the following interview with Prof. Ian S. Lustick of the University of Pennsylvania who most eloquently and cogently responded to the questions listed below, and shed very important light on Israel's conduct over the years, which qualified it in his view to be a “crazy state.”

Ben-Meir: (1) You have mentioned Yehezkel Dror's (1971) book *Crazy States*, in which he creates an analytical model in which to understand and predict the behavior of irrational, or “crazy,” states and non-state actors, particularly Israel's enemies, and allege that Israel in fact has emerged as a “crazy state.” Dror notes five attributes of a “crazy state;” in which way do you feel that Israel has met each attribute of a “crazy state?”

Lustick: Dror's (1971) strange little book was designed to encourage international relations scholars and policy makers to treat all countries and movements Israel deemed its enemies as “crazy” and against whom literally any tactics could be justified. Even casual reading of the book makes it clear to the reader that it was Nazi Germany that was the historical case inspiring the category; it being almost the only source of empirical examples Dror offered in the book of what he meant by “crazy.” But that makes it even more deeply ironic that half a century after the book's publication, Israel itself fits that category more than any other state except, perhaps, North Korea. We can see this for each of the five key characteristics Dror described as associated with states and movements that he argued should be treated as “crazy.” For the first three dimensions of Dror's formulation of craziness I quote from Mark Romaneski's (1981) review of Dror's book.

- “pursuing aggressive goals which are often harmful to others;”
  - The goals pursued by Israeli governments since the 1967 war have steadily escalated. From achieving

recognition and peace with Israel's its neighbors by trading land for treaties, Israeli governments expanded their ambitions so that now the guiding vision (albeit seldom articulated) is to consolidate permanent control of all lands occupied in 1967 without extending political rights to their Palestinian inhabitants. The absence of a plan for, or indeed any discussion of, extending citizenship to five million West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza Palestinians, indicates that what vision exists is the permanent subordination of that population accompanied by pressures to leave the country to be achieved by a combination of immiseration, social and political strangulation, and treatment of the Gaza Strip and much of the West Bank as free fire zones. On a regional level Israel's goals have also expanded, from seeking peace, even if mainly through the use of violence to “teach” adversaries the wisdom of accommodation to Israel's existence, to the effectively unrestrained use of force to “mow the lawn,” a strategy of regular and expanded levels of destruction designed, not to encourage compromise and moderation, but to prevent adversaries from acting on what Israelis expect to be a permanent state of rage.

- “displaying an intensely radical commitment to such goals;”
  - Evidence of Israel's radicalization, consistent with Dror's image of a crazy state, include its declared and vigorously pursued policy of threatening (and carrying

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *World Affairs* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Policy Studies Organization.

out) military action against Iran in order to preserve its own nuclear monopoly in the region; its wildly disproportionate destruction of an entire society in the Gaza Strip, including the mass killing of civilians; the regular use of collective punishment in Lebanon and the West Bank; and the indoctrination of its citizenry to view every display of dissent or resistance by Palestinians as terrorism and as justification for treating non-Jews as unworthy of humane consideration.

- “exhibiting a pervasive sense of moral superiority over others, despite a willingness to act immorally within the normal international framework;”
  - Watching Israeli television or reading most of its press and listening to the speeches and remarks of leading ministers, one sees and hears a constant refrain: Because of anti-Semitism the entire world, with few exceptions, is blind to the obvious truth that almost only Israeli Jews can see, and that is that Israel is fighting a wholly moral if desperate struggle against pure evil and that nothing Israel does to anyone in the service of that effort can be an occasion for soul-searching, reassessment, or consideration of the possibility that Israeli policies and actions themselves are blameworthy.
- realizing an ability to rationally select logical instruments to advance those goals;
  - On a tactical level the planning and execution of Israel's strikes against Hezbollah operatives, assassinations of Iranian scientists, and large numbers of clandestine and effective operations in Iran, however bloody and ruthless, are evidence of a system that can devise effective policies, maintain secrecy, and implement actions efficiently based on carefully assessed opportunities and risks.
- possessing external action capabilities sufficient to impact upon goal achievement
  - Israel has one of the largest and most potent military forces in the world, including an extraordinarily sophisticated array of atomic weapons as well as, according to reports, biological and chemical agents. Its espionage, and subversion capabilities are legendary as is influence of its agents and allies in foreign capitals, especially in the United States and Western Europe.

Ben-Meir: (2) *In what ways has the United States enabled Israel to become a “crazy state”?*

Lustick: As I argue in my book, *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One State Reality* (Lustick 2019) one of three crucial determinants of Israel's radical right-wing and maximalist trajectory has been the nearly unconditional support which American administrations have given to Israeli governments. That support has, more than anything else, been the consequence of the fearsome political clout of the Israel lobby that sabotaged, thwarted, or reduced to insignificance every serious presidential initiative to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem based on partition. As it became clear that Israel could have its cake and eat it too, that it could settle and expand its control in the occupied territories to rule out a Palestinian state-based

peace agreement, and still maintain US economic, military, and diplomatic support, no Israeli politicians other than those ready to pander to the most expansive and uncompromising visions of Jewish ultranationalists and fundamentalists, could win elections. I don't believe this was the intention of most of those who have supported the Israel lobby in the United States, but the ruin of the careers of such promising moderate and sophisticated Israeli politicians as Yossi Sarid, Yossi Beilin, Shulamit Aloni, and Haim Ramon, and indeed the production of Israel as a radical right-wing state, can in large measure be traced to the unintended consequence of the Israel lobby's super-abundant political power in Washington.

Ben-Meir: (3) *There is a near-universal consensus that Israel's response to Hamas' attack was disproportionate and the Israeli army has often acted indiscriminately against combatants and non-combatants. (a) do you share this view, and (b) what do you think the long-term ramifications of this will be on Israel?*

Lustick: First let me note that this “near-universal consensus” to which you refer about the indiscriminate and disproportionate nature of Israel's pulverization of Gaza does not include Israeli government officials, diplomats, propagandists, and military officers. Nor does it include most Israeli media outlets and, indeed, most Israelis. This is another way of highlighting the country's isolation from the rest of the world—a kind of solipsistic trance easily coded, perhaps, as “crazy.”

But yes, that consensus does include me. I believe the long-term ramifications of this vengeful spasm of brutal violence cannot and will not be appreciated until the tens of thousands of bodies buried under the rubble are recovered and until the memories of Palestinians and the images of their suffering captured on videos so many of them must have taken during the war, are shared with the world. If the scale of the trauma inflicted on Israeli society by 1200 deaths on October 7, the abduction of 250 others, and 15,000 military casualties suffered since then, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands from their homes, cannot yet be accurately gauged, how much less capable are we of assessing the long-term impact of losses, abductions, and displacements at 20–50 times those numbers in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon? At the very least, for decades, Israel, Israelis, and the products of Israeli culture will likely be the object of scorn and disgust by billions of people around the world.

Ben-Meir: (4) *Trump suggested that the US would take over Gaza and basically exile the 2.2 million Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt. Suppose he tries to act on this crazy idea, how might that impact the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the region's stability?*

Lustick: I do not take what Trump says on any particular day as an indication of what he or the US government will actually do. The danger comes not from the results of an American effort to turn Gaza into a Palestinian-rein Riviera, but from the belief such talk encourages among extremists in Israel who will use Trump's words to build support for mass expulsions. This is, in fact, how Ben-Gurion used the unimplemented recommendation of the Peel Commission in 1937 to make peace in Palestine by dividing it and by transferring hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes in the Galilee. The Peel plan was never implemented, but in 1948 Ben-Gurion acted decisively on

his memory that the leading country in the world had, 11 years earlier, sanctioned the forcible transfer of Palestinians.

Actually, there is a sense in which I would support Trump's vision. Gaza is virtually uninhabitable. The country which made it uninhabitable, Israel, is also where the vast refugee population in Gaza is from and to which they yearn to return. The lands in the Gaza envelope are sparsely inhabited and include the villages and towns from which many of those refugees were expelled in 1948. So moving them from Gaza into new and comfortable residential communities in Israel makes tremendous sense. Indeed, a little noticed feature of the famous Trump-Kushner plan for the future of Israel and Palestine was that hundreds of thousands of Gaza refugees were to be resettled in tracts of land in the northern Negev.

Ben-Meir: (5) *It appears that Trump is ready and willing to go all the way to support Israel. Do you agree that Trump promoting his idea of taking Gaza over, supplying Israel with all the weapons it is asking for, and providing it with political cover, is in fact undermining the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace based on a two-state solution?*

Lustick: No, I do not see Trump's policies as undermining prospects for a two-state solution. Why? Because I see no prospect, under any conditions, and regardless of what policies an American president could now conceivably take, that would lead to an Israeli-Palestinian peace based on a diplomatically orchestrated Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza and the creation there of an independent Palestinian state. That train has left the station. That ship has sailed. If a Palestinian state separate from Israel someday emerges, it could only be the result of secession, not negotiation. It has been at least a decade and a half since any expert or advocate of the two-state solution has been able to describe a plausible political process that could lead to its consummation. Continued focus on the seductive mirage of a negotiated two-state solution simply prolongs and deepens the regime of systematic subordination, isolation, and political disenfranchisement of Palestinians that has existed now for more than half a century.

The real struggle, which is yet to begin, is over how the regime, whose governments rule both Jews and Arabs in the country, will change to accommodate that reality.

Ben-Meir: (6) *In their summit in Cairo, the Arab states came up with their own peace plan for the reconstruction of Gaza. Both Israel and the US rejected the plan, albeit they did not offer any viable alternative. From your perspective, what should the pillars on which a sustainable solution for Gaza be anchored on, and what role, if any, should Hamas play?*

Lustick: Ideally, and, I think, eventually, Gaza will be absorbed into Israel as part of a long process that will transform the country from a state dominated by and serving the interests of Jews to one that reflects the cultures and aspirations of all its inhabitants. This will not be the result of a process of negotiation, but will, or at least can, be a consequence of decades of mobilization, struggle, incremental change, shifting alignments, adjusted identities, and tactically embraced suffrage extensions. This is, roughly, how states that for generations excluded large

and despised populations from their political communities—whether those populations were Black, Irish Catholic, or female—eventually democratized.

In the short run, I do see promise in the proposal made by Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid Party in Israel that Egypt be given control of the Gaza Strip and its reconstruction, as a kind of subcontractor, in return for the world community paying off Egypt's debts amounting to some \$150 billion. Egypt's government has no interest in helping Hamas survive, even though the potential political mobilization of masses of Palestinian Muslims will always be a reality of life in Gaza.

Ben-Meir: (7) *I have maintained that Hamas' attack and Israel's retaliation have created a new paradigm that provides an opening for an Israeli-Palestinian peace in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. Do you concur with this view? Why or why not?*

Lustick: That is wonderful that you can imagine this. But what “this view” is, is a pretty picture of the future. Until you explain what this new paradigm contains that reorganizes how the protagonists think about themselves and one another and until you describe, based on these new conceptions, some plausible combination of developments that could lead to political postures in Israel and among the Palestinians consistent with your vision of peace, I can only consider it as no more than another pretty picture of the future, not as an “opening” toward a peace agreement.

---

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

## References

- Dror, Y. 1971. *Crazy States*. Heath Lexington Books.
- Lustick, I. S. 2019. *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One State Reality*. University of Pennsylvania Press. [www.paradigmlostbook.com](http://www.paradigmlostbook.com).
- Romaneski, M. 1981. “Review of Crazy States.” *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review* 4, no. 1: 225–231.