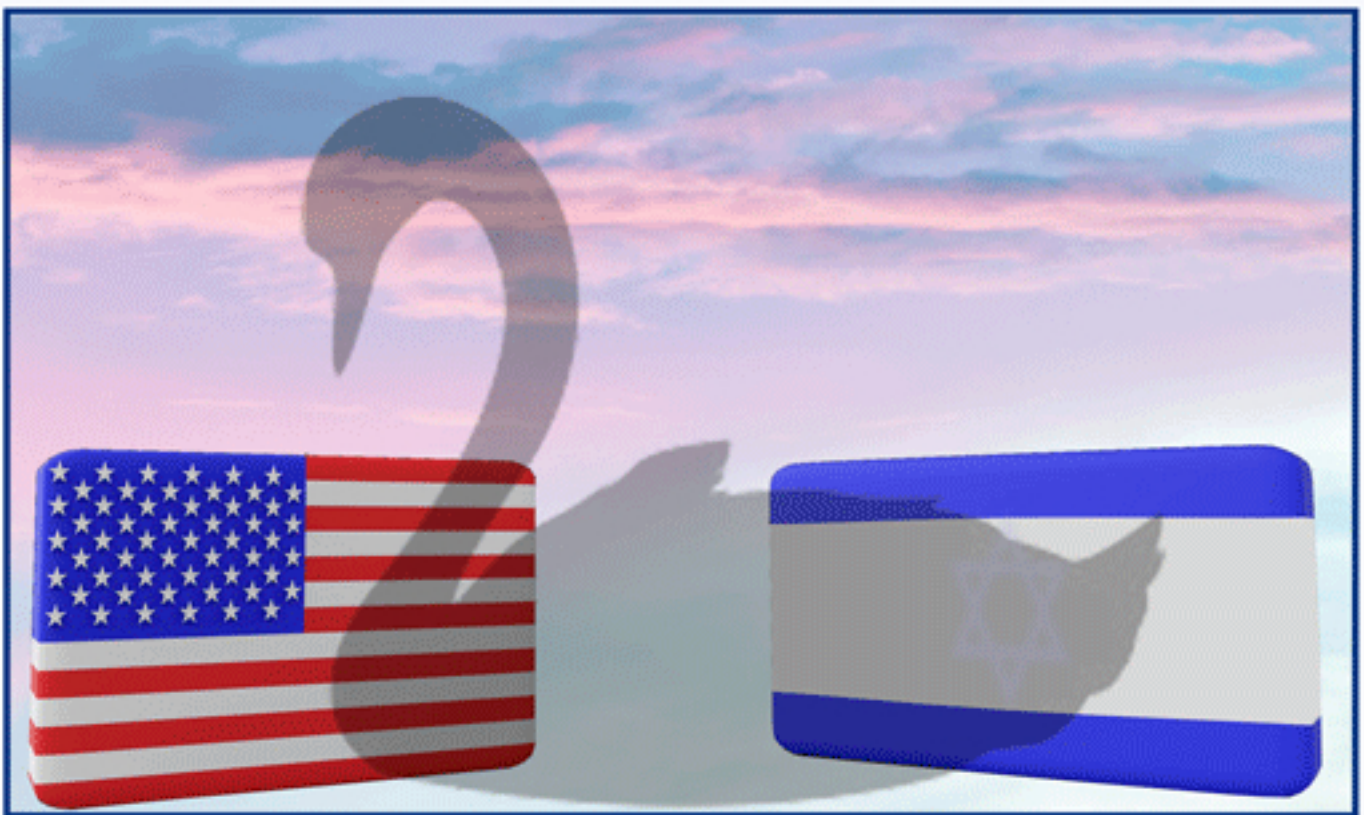




Academic Paper

The Black Swan Variable in the Future of the US-Israeli Relationship



Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay

August 2023



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

The opinions expressed in all the publications and studies are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of al-Zaytouna Centre.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents1
Introduction2
The Black Swan Space in Israeli Strategic Thinking6
Conclusion 9
Recommendations10
Endnotes..... 11



The Black Swan Variable in the Future of the US-Israeli Relationship

Prof. Dr. Walid Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

The black swan events in futures studies involve similar connotations with the terms high impact low probability (HILP), wild card and tipping point. These refer to unexpected developments that lead to radical changes in the scene under study. These would be “assumed to occur” and then their implications would be studied, so that decision-makers prepare suitable methods to deal with them.²



This variable has often led to radical shifts with difficult-to-predict repercussions, thus prompting futures studies researchers to employ the futures wheel method based on the if/ then rule. Hence, the black swan factor or the sudden and unexpected change can be imagined and its repercussions studied in advance to determine suitable adaptation methods, and as Helmuth von Moltke, the famous Prussian military commander, said, “I expected the enemy to come from one of the four directions, but it often came from the fifth,” that is the unexpected one.

For example, the visit of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Israel in 1977 constituted a radical shift in the geopolitical and geostrategic structure in the Middle East although it was not expected, especially in the wake of the relative military victory achieved by the Arab forces over Israel in 1973, shortly before the visit. Also, most of the leaders of the socialist countries did not expect that Mikhail Gorbachev’s accession to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 would lead to all the political, economic, military and cultural repercussions it had nor did the intellectual elites imagine that the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 would lead China to jump from rank 36 globally to the very advanced rank it now occupies.



US think tanks have been dealing with the black swan variable for some time, especially in the Middle East. During Barack Obama's period, a study was made on the black swan variable in US politics. In the context of this study, models of the black swan were determined such as a revolution in Saudi Arabia, the collapse of the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, or the collapse and disintegration of the Palestinian Authority (PA) while observing the premises of such possibilities and how to confront them.³ Israeli think tanks have also deeply researched the issue of the black swan and its possibilities in the Middle East, where Iran's possession of nuclear weapons was the black swan mostly considered by Israeli studies, which explored its repercussions on the Middle East and Israeli international relations.⁴



Research Hypothesis

Based on the if/ then rule, we will put the following hypothesis: If the US abandons support for Israel due to fundamental shifts in international relations, Israel will face the largest crisis in its history, which may entail countless repercussions.

This hypothesis is not baseless but there is what supports it, which necessitates putting the hypothesis of the black swan as the first part of the equation under consideration, especially since its occurrence will carry transformations of great importance and influence, which is the second part of the equation in this matter.

Preliminary indications for the black swan hypothesis:

- ▶ 1. Dominique Moïsi, a geopolitical advisor at the French Institut Montaigne, believes that Israel “is in fact gradually preparing itself for the Chinese era, a country considered to be the most interested in the region, to have the most means, and to have increasing influence in the Middle East, especially when it comes to energy.”⁵
- ▶ 2. Martin Indyk, the former US ambassador to Israel and former special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, warned that the relationship “will come under strain” should the illiberal right-wing continues to grow in Israel and if settlement building does not stop. This is consistent with what *Time* magazine reported about increased criticism within



the Democratic Party of Israel's policies (such as the criticism of Bob Menendes or Jacky Rosen who are both influential leaders in the Democratic Party), not to mention the shifts in the orientations of American public opinion, especially since the percentage of young Americans who fully sympathize with Israel is less than half of the percentage of elderly sympathizers aged over 50 years. This is an indication of a future change in the level of sympathy associated with the calls, although still shy and limited, to reconsider US aid to Israel.⁶

- ▶ 3. The transition of the relationship between Israel and the US from unconditional to restricted support: When one of the most prominent theorists of international relations and professor at Harvard University, Stephen M. Walt,

entitles his article in one of the most prominent US magazines in May 2021 “It’s Time to End the ‘Special Relationship’ With Israel,” then it is worth taking it into consideration in futures studies. Walt calls, in light of the continuation of the conflict



between the Palestinians and the Israelis, for conditional US aid to Israel in light of the non-existent benefit and great burdens of this special relationship between the two sides, and the need to transform the relationship from a special to a “more normal” one. He indicates that Israel may have been “the only democracy in the Middle East, but it was not a liberal democracy like the US, where all religions and races are supposed to have equal rights,” adding, “Consistent with Zionism’s core objectives, Israel privileged Jews over others by conscious design.” Walt asserts that his vision relies on reports by Israeli human rights organizations that monitor human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories committed by Israeli security, military and settler institutions, and which are increasing with the “rightward drift of Israel’s domestic politics and the growing role of extremist parties in Israeli politics.” Walt says that Israel was beneficial to the US during the Cold War—despite the exaggeration in that—adding, the “Cold War has been over for 30 years, however, and unconditional support for Israel today creates more problems for Washington than it solves. Israel could do nothing to help the United States in its two wars against Iraq; indeed, the United States had to send Patriot missiles to Israel during the first Gulf War to protect it from Iraqi Scud attacks.” Also, the disproportionate foreign-policy bandwidth relations with Israel takes valuable time away from dealing with bigger problems such as climate change, China and economic recovery. In addition, the special US-Israel relationship complicates the relationship between US and the rest of the Middle East countries due to the constant opposition of Israel and the Israel lobby in Washington, on the strategic choices of the US concerning regional problems,



especially the proliferation of nuclear weapons, where Israel is the only Middle Eastern country that actually has it. In addition, the special relationship with Israel is dragging the US into policies not consistent with US principles. For example, because Israel does not want the Islamic movement to take over power in Egypt, even though it won in a democratic way, the US turned a blind eye to this reality to serve Israel's interest without regard to distorting the US vision of democracy and turning it into political hypocrisy, which is the same is happening with other countries in the region, and even with anti-US movements because of their bias towards Israel. Walt also refers to the intervention of the Jewish lobby in preventing some individuals from assuming certain positions (and provides examples in this respect), especially if they are perceived as insufficiently "pro-Israel" or even being mildly critical of it. Moreover, the US's image has been affected by its continued objection to resolutions against Israel in the Security Council and United Nations (UN) agencies, as if it is opposing the international will.⁷

These views are an extension of Stephen Walt and his colleague John Mearsheimer's sharp criticism of the role of Israeli pressure groups, focusing on the impact of these groups on US interests while not denying Israel's right to exist. The two authors link many of the US problems in the Middle East with the repercussions of Israeli policies harmful to US relations in the region, and they review the mechanisms of influence of the Israel lobby on US policies, especially through influencing US presidents and various US circles, which has made Israel a "strategic burden."⁸

- ▶ 4. In 2010, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published an article by the prominent US strategic analyst Anthony Cordesman in which he stressed the need for Israel to be as sensitive to US strategic concerns, as the US is to those of Israel. Stating some examples of Israel's disregard for US interests in the region, especially in occupation and settlement policies, Jerusalem, interference in Arab states, and the threat of war with Iran. He concludes his article that the "depth of America's moral commitment does not justify or excuse actions by an Israeli government that unnecessarily make Israel a strategic liability when it should remain an asset," adding,

It is time Israel realized that it has obligations to the United States, as well as the United States to Israel, and that it become far more careful about the extent to which it test[s] the limits of U.S. patience and exploits the support of American Jews. This does not mean taking a single action that undercuts Israeli security, but it does mean realizing that Israel should show enough discretion to reflect the fact that it is a tertiary US strategic interest in a complex and demanding world.⁹



Cordeman's vision is no different from an assessment presented by former Mossad chief Meir Dagan before the members of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in the Knesset in June 2010. He noted the disappearance of the Soviet and Western blocs with the end of the Cold War, and said, "Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden."¹⁰ That is the US view of the strategic function of Israel may be affected by the rapidly changing international conditions.



Martin Indyk, former US ambassador to Israel and former special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, warned that a hardline Israeli government risks eroding its relationship with the US, which has criticized Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, the sabotage of the prospects for a two-state solution and the efforts to limit the power of the judiciary. Indeed, this trend is gaining growing support in the US Congress.¹¹

- ▶ 5. Israel's tendency to be independent from the US: In an article by one of the most prominent editors of *The New York Times*, Max Fisher, the author refers to three aspects that make Israel more independent or less dependent on the US, namely:¹²
 - ☑ a. Israel is no longer in dire need of US military aid to ensure its security because it now produces many of its most essential weapons domestically, such as the Iron Dome.
 - ☑ b. US aid to Israel was 10% of Israel's economy in 1981 and dropped to almost 1% in 2020.
 - ☑ c. Israel has become more self-sufficient diplomatically. Its network of relations with various countries, including Arab states, indicate that US diplomatic support to Israel is no longer the same.

This means, from the author's point of view, that although the Israeli need for US support was and is still important, the decline of this importance makes Israel less affected by US pressure or what could be exerted by US liberal movements.

The Black Swan Space in Israeli Strategic Thinking¹³

- ▶ 1. The belief in some Israeli and US circles that the world has begun to enter the "post-US" era, and is preparing for the Chinese phase, a country considered to be the most interested in the Middle East due to geopolitical and geostrategic factors. It is noted that the rhythm of Israeli-Asian relations is proceeding at an increasing pace, which



explains Israeli preparations for such a possibility, thus prompting the US to react to such Israeli-Chinese rapprochement.

- ▶ 2. The damaging impact of the continuous defense of Israel on the US has become more evident, especially in times of US financial crises.
- ▶ 3. Israel may lose the support of large numbers of the Democratic Party due to the US far-right support to it.

- ▶ 4. The democracy level may increase in the Arab world, and a new democratic era would lead to a rapid economic growth and increased regional integration, leading the world to view Israel in the same way that Taiwan is currently being viewed.



- ▶ 5. The election of a US president not biased towards Israel. For example, Bernie Sanders was a strong candidate for the Democratic Party’s nomination in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, and he ranked second in each of them while adopting positions that Israel considered hostile. He criticized the war on Iraq, the US intervention in Yemen, and the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2014. Also, he has strongly condemned the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) that supports Israel, Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the unified capital of Israel as well as the US assassination of the Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani.¹⁴

- ▶ 6. The continuation of the “slow gradual” shift in the attitudes of US society towards Israel, as US public opinion polls show such indicators as:¹⁵

- a. Declining support for Israel, especially among the Democrats. Indeed, some Israeli writers consider “Israel’s conservative revolution is coinciding with rising progressivism in the Democratic Party and putting the two countries’ ‘special relationship’ to the test like never before.”¹⁶

- b. The younger generations in US society are less sympathetic to Israel.

- c. The advocates of pressure on Israel to achieve a settlement are more than those on the Palestinians. US President Joe Biden’s criticism in July 2023 that Netanyahu’s cabinet contained some of the “most extreme” members he had seen, accusing them of being “part of the problem” to the political settlement



in the region, then Itamar Ben-Gvir's response that Biden "needs to realise that we are no longer a star on the American flag," might be an indication of some of the tensions between the two sides.¹⁷

▶ 7. A study by an Israeli researcher indicates that the rift between the US and Israel cannot be ruled out. It relies on a few indicators, the most important of which are:¹⁸

a. The strategic benefits of the US-Israel relationship, while reciprocal, are not symmetrical, where Israel clearly benefits far more.

b. The internal change of the political system in either of them may lead to profound differences between them. This study referred to the problem of the independence of the judiciary in 2019, that is, before the explosion of demonstrations due to this problem, which indicates that changes due to ideological reasons or security considerations in either of them may produce deep problems, especially since the inclination towards the right in Israel is proceeding in a way not commensurate with such inclination in the US society. This might make Israelis view the US similar what they view the European Union, where 51% of them view it as a foe.



c. The growth in the US of secularism as a megatrend may affect the degree of US public sympathy with Israel based on the common religious roots between the two sides.

d. The American Jews, who constitute Israeli pressure tool in the US, are more liberal than the Israeli Jews, which enhance the future possibility of cracks in their relations.



Conclusion

- ▶ 1. While reemphasizing that the black swan model is a weak possibility, ignoring it constitutes a strategic mistake due to the serious repercussions if it occurs, which requires studying and planning how to adapt to it in the future.
- ▶ 2. The depth of the accelerating local, regional and international changes makes the possibility of a “black swan” event higher than if the international scene was more divergent, less interdependent and running at a slower pace. The Ukrainian crisis between Russia and the Western countries and the US-Chinese positions regarding Taiwan put Israel in an awkward position, since it didn’t take a clear position that is consistent with that of the US, as other Western countries did. For Israel has its own concerns about the repercussions of its blatant siding with the US in any of those two struggles.¹⁹
- ▶ 3. US pragmatism and the reliance of the Zionist movement since its inception on international support (Britain, US, etc.) enhance the possibility of laxity in the bilateral relations, especially if the US role in the international strategic decision-making declined.



- ▶ 4. Despite the great importance that was—and still is to some extent—of Taiwan in US politics, many Taiwanese diplomats did not expect that the US would accept the “one China policy,” expel Taiwan from the UN and cut off its diplomatic relations with it. However, that what actually happened when the US interest was to gradually abandon Taiwan, and is the very significant historical precedent for the Israeli decision-makers.²⁰



Recommendations

- ▶ 1. Arab diplomacy, especially Palestinian one, should not exclude the black swan model from its future visions, especially in the medium and long terms. All the indicators we referred to above reinforce the need to deal with such possibility.
- ▶ 2. Arab and Palestinian plans should include ways that would strengthen the US liberal forces that are not in tune with Israeli occupation policies.
- ▶ 3. Competing with Israel in developing relations with the rising international powers, especially China, India and Russia, through more involvement in international organizations that are more balanced in their positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, such as the BRICS group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
- ² Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), passim; and Bernice Lee et.al., *Preparing for High-impact, Low-probability Events* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), 2012), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Energy,%20Environment%20and%20Development/r0112_highimpact.pdf
- ³ Martin Indyk et. al. (eds), *Big Bets and Black Swan* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 2013), pp.76–89, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/big-bets-and-black-swans-a-presidential-briefing-book-20.pdf>
- ⁴ Shabtai Shoval, Israel's National Security Strategy for 2030, site of Israel Defense, 11/9/2018, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/35633>
- ⁵ Dominique Moïsi, What Future for the Relationship Between the United States and Israel?, site of Institut Montaigne, 9/3/2021, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/what-future-relationship-between-united-states-and-israel>
- ⁶ Yasmeen Sarhan, The Once 'Unbreakable' U.S.-Israel Bond Is Under Strain, site of Time, 30/1/2023, <https://time.com/6251298/blinden-israel-visit-us-tensions/>; and Max Fisher, Israel's dark future, site of Vox, 13/4/2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/4/13/8390387/israel-dark-future>
- ⁷ Stephen Walt, It's Time to End the 'Special Relationship' With Israel, site of Foreign Policy magazine, 27/5/2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/27/its-time-to-end-the-special-relationship-with-israel>
- ⁸ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp.11, 50, 113–114 and 336–337.
- ⁹ Cordesman has worked in the office of the US Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, the US State Department and the Department of Energy, not to mention his work as a consultant to a number of scientific and diplomatic bodies. See Anthony Cordesman, Israel as a Strategic Liability?, site of Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2/6/2010, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/israel-strategic-liability>; and Expert: Anthony H. Cordesman, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/people/anthony-h-cordesman>
- ¹⁰ Jim Lobe, Doubts Grow Over Israel's Value as U.S. Ally, site of Global Issues, 3/6/2010, <https://www.globalissues.org/news/2010/06/03/5874>
- ¹¹ Yasmeen Sarhan, The Once 'Unbreakable' U.S.-Israel Bond Is Under Strain.
- ¹² Max Fisher, As Israel's Dependence on U.S. Shrinks, So Does U.S. Leverage, site of *The New York Times* newspaper, 24/5/2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/24/world/middleeast/Israel-American-support.html>
- ¹³ Dominique Moïsi, What Future for the Relationship Between the United States and Israel?; and Mohammad Fadel, Can Black Swans lead to a sustainable Arab-Israeli peace?, 2/2/2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/02/can-black-swans-lead-to-a-sustainable-arab-israeli-peace/>
- ¹⁴ See regarding Sanders's positions:
Joan E Greve and agencies, Bernie Sanders introduces resolution blocking \$735m weapons sale to Israel, site of *The Guardian*, 20/5/2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/20/bernie-sanders-israel-weapons-sale-resolution>; Ben Samuels, Bernie Sanders Hints at New Legislation Conditioning U.S. Aid to Israel, site of *Haaretz* newspaper, 20/2/2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2023-02-20/ty-article/.premium/bernie-sanders-hints-at-new-legislation-conditioning-u-s-aid-to-israel/00000186-6f44-d7c1-a1ee-6f7f0bd90000>; TOI Staff, Bernie Sanders accuses Netanyahu of overreacting in Gaza war, site of The Times of Israel, 19/11/2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bernie-sanders-accuses-netanyahu-of-overreacting-in-gaza-war/>; Lee Fang and Alex Emmons, Bernie Sanders Wants Congress to End U.S. Support for Yemen War. Saudi Lobbyists Fought Similar Measures Last Year, site of The Intercept, <https://theintercept.com/2018/02/28/yemen-war-bernie-sanders-saudi-arabia/>; Sanders Statement on Trump's Plan to Recognize Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel, site of Bernie Sanders, 5/12/2017, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/sanders-statement-on-trumps-plan-to-recognize-jerusalem-as-the-capital-of-israel/>; and Matthew Choi, 2020 Dems warn of escalation in Middle East after Soleimani killing, site of Politico, 2/1/2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/02/soleimani-2020-iran-democrats-093123>; and <https://web.archive.org/web/20200228142626>
- ¹⁵ Lydia Saad, Key Trends in U.S. Views on Israel and the Palestinians, site of Gallup, 28/5/2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/350393/key-trends-views-israel-palestinians.aspx>



-
- ¹⁶ Aluf Benn, Fear of Abandonment: Will Israel Lose America?, *Haaretz*, 8/1/2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-01-08/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/fear-of-abandonment-will-israel-lose-america/00000185-8355-db89-afbd-a3f7e6f10000>
- ¹⁷ Aime Williams and James Shotter, Joe Biden calls out ‘extreme’ elements within Israel’s government, site of *Financial Times*, 9/7/2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c91f5df-58ce-4fe2-b4f3-de12f565eac2>
- ¹⁸ Mark Heller, The United States and Israel: The Risk of Going Apart, SWP Comment, No. 50 December 2019, site of German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 10/12/2019, pp. 3–8, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2019C50_heller.pdf
- ¹⁹ Alon Pinkas, Netanyahu Is Playing a Dangerous Diplomatic Game With China and the U.S., *Haaretz*, 28/6/2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-06-28/ty-article/.premium/netanyahus-dangerous-fortune-cookie-diplomacy-with-china-and-the-u-s/00000189-0186-d0cb-a98f-0f979a020000>; and Denis Baturin, Israeli weapons and mediation in Ukrainian crisis – a new trap set by Washington, site of Modern Diplomacy, 13/1/2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/01/13/israeli-weapons-and-mediation-in-ukrainian-crisis-a-new-trap-set-by-washington/>
- ²⁰ Chien-Huei Wu and Ching-Fu Lin, Taiwan and the Myth of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, site of Verfassungsblog, 14/4/2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/taiwan-and-the-myth-of-un-general-assembly-resolution-2758>

