

ISRAEL'S NATIONAL SECURITY:

Challenges and Assets

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Israel's national security challenges are unique in the sense that no other open society has ever been surrounded by active and potential enemies and subjected to threats with an existential dimension for generations. Open societies, which maintain a democratic regime and a pluralistic way of life, impose strict limitations on their own conduct, even vis-à-vis their worst enemies, and consider upholding their core values and standards of conduct no less important than safeguarding their security and wellbeing. These restrictions on the part of Israel motivate its enemies and adversaries, unburdened as they are by equivalent inhibitions, who hope to use them to secure immunity from Israeli retribution and countermeasures. An effective response to Israel's national security challenges is, thus, more difficult than it is for other nations for three reasons: first, Israel must fight, so to speak, with one hand tied behind its back; second, its enemies are encouraged by this and forge their strategy around it; and third, Israel's partners-in-values, never having confronted a generations-long challenge of this magnitude and ferocity, are often appalled by what it takes to survive this unique challenge.

A comprehensive study of Israel's national security requires not only a description of these challenges, but also a focused discussion of their structural nature and an assessment of the assets upon which Israel

relies in meeting them. The main challenges are in the regional and international environments, while the crucial asset is domestic. Another important asset is American support.

Challenges

The Regional Environment

Far beyond the direct impact of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Jewish State is profoundly affected by the severe structural difficulties of the Arab societies surrounding it. For almost one hundred years, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the transition from traditional structures to a modern social and political order capable of meeting the challenges of the twentieth century seems to have reached a dead end. It is not the recent eruptions of chaos and violence in major centers of the Arab World that begs explanation, but the fact that the dysfunctional social and political structures “from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Persian or Arab] Gulf” did not collapse sooner. It is instructive that those who have thus far been spared the upheaval are the more traditional societies and regimes. While those traditional structures may have survived, they hardly offer the Arabs a better opportunity to meet the challenges of the modern era. The net result is a resounding failure: not only a few failing states, but a failing region and, to some extent, a failing society.

This harsh judgment may be controversial and, coming from an outsider, particularly from an Israeli, also suspect. But what is important for the purpose of this discussion is not its objective validity, but the prevailing perception among Arab elites. This perception has gradually evolved since the turn of the millennium and has dramatically changed since the first hopes of the Arab Spring were dashed. Arab elites have become more cognizant than ever of the failure of the Arabs to find their place in the modern world, let alone play the leading role they believe they deserve, in keeping with their glorious past. They may console themselves with elaborate excuses—colonialism, occupation, globalization, and a host of conspiracies—but they fear that the gap is constantly widening between the world as they deem it should have been and the world they increasingly recognize as it is. This gap seems to have become virtually unbridgeable.

When they look at Israel, they see the mirror image of their own predicament: Israel is a shining success, not without openly admitted major flaws, but uniquely adjusted to the modern world, thriving and displaying remarkable resilience despite perpetual war, boycott, and isolation. This is widely perceived among Arab elites as an aberration and nothing less than a major distortion of the cosmic order: Arabs, historically destined for glory trumped by Jews, traditionally condemned to humiliation. Even if, miraculously, a mutually satisfactory solution were to be found to the tangible components of the Arab–Israeli conflict, it seems that this Arab grievance would still prevail and overshadow other considerations.

This is not to say that the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan will not endure or that other countries may not conclude similar agreements with Israel. The recent mayhem in the region may even produce deeper and wider common strategic interests between Israel and important regional players. The problem is that radical Arab regimes and potent non-state actors are very likely to find that mainstream Arab elites and the “Arab Street” they inspire support a perpetuated struggle against the hated Jews. They support it not only because the Jews are perceived to be alien to what they consider their exclusive region, but also because Jews have the audacity to demonstrate astounding success in the midst of humiliating regional failure. The less those disenchanted Arabs believe they can secure a better life for their own children, the more likely they are to support the radicals who want to deny a good life to those whom they perceive as unworthy of it.

The essentially sectarian character of Arab societies, so dramatically exposed in the recent regional chaos, also has major implications for Israel. In such an intolerant environment, where Arabs butcher one another on a monstrous scale along religious and other primordial lines, a pluralistic Arab system that would tolerate the Jewish State is all but unthinkable. The specific grievances of the Arab–Israeli conflict pale in comparison to this internecine impediment to peace.

All of these combined—the cultural humiliation, the deep-seated envy, the profound intolerance, the rampant violence, and the historic grievance of losing part of the Arab homeland to the Jewish “usurpers”—make the Israeli challenge in the regional environment a structural one. Israel can meet this challenge effectively above all by maintaining its deterrence capability, though its manifestations may change over time as they have done in the course of more than a century. However, Arab acceptance of Israel within the region, in any meaningful sense of the term, is not a realistic option in the foreseeable future.

The International Environment

Israel’s national security is most seriously challenged in two interrelated international arenas—international organizations (primarily the United Nations) and Europe. Israel’s isolation in the UN would not have been so severe had the European vote not been so consistently unfriendly. European governments could demonstrate more understanding for Israel’s response to its unique challenges were it not for their commitment to the idea of the UN as a centerpiece of an emerging “international community” that recognizes Europe as the ultimate judge of legitimacy. Interrelated as these challenges are, both deserve a separate discussion.

International Organizations

To say that Israel is vastly outnumbered and diplomatically “outgunned” in international organizations would be an understatement. Confronting twenty-two Arab states, fifty-eight Islamic states, and 137 Non-Aligned states (120 members and seventeen observers) out of 193, Israel does not stand a chance. These states consistently vote against Israel, including those that maintain friendly, even close relations with Israel on the bilateral level. Arab and Muslim states find this a cost free way to please their elites by demonstrating (mostly insincere) solidarity with the Palestinians and their own radicals. The so-called Non-Aligned countries do so primarily in support of their largest group (Arab and Muslim members), thereby consolidating their electoral bloc, which accounts for more than 70 percent of all UN member states. Israel often finds itself isolated, with the US, Micronesia, and the Marshal Islands its only supporters.

This is not merely an issue of losing votes in the UN. Bashing Israel has also become the favorite pastime of many international agencies, which level the most ludicrous charges against it; they pervert the major values of the open society system to delegitimize the Jewish State, allowing Syria, Sudan, Libya, Iran, Cuba, North Korea, and their ilk to set the standards for human rights, democracy, and pluralism. For some of the most oppressive regimes, this is a very useful instrument with which to forge an upside-down international set of norms, whereby Israeli (and sometimes also American) pluralistic democracy is the pariah and they sit in moral judgment.

The chances of changing this system are miniscule to begin with because it works so well for all the Non-Aligned parties concerned. What makes these chances virtually non-existent is the unintentional *de facto* collaboration of Europe. With twenty-eight seats in the UN, the EU constitutes the largest voting bloc outside the Non-Aligned countries. When a vote to condemn Israel is held, EU countries tend to abstain; sometimes they vote with the majority but only rarely do they support Israel. With their abstentions, they actually legitimize the practice that excommunicates Israel. Were they to consistently vote against the most outrageous allegations, it would send a clear message that open societies recognize the profound difference between their own imperfections and the unmitigated disrespect for human rights of those who wave the banner of the assault on Israel. The present behavior of value-oriented European democracies further motivates the oppressive assailants of Israel to believe that they occupy not only the international political arena, but also the universal moral high ground.

When diplomats seek to get something done within international organizations—be it to forge a consensus favorable to their own national interests, to secure economic benefits for their country, to chair prestigious agencies, or to elevate their personal status—they also need the votes of countries that are obsessed with the Jewish State and others that go along with the Israel bashers for political convenience. Siding with them against Israel, or at least not standing in their way, does not cost much and is almost

unavoidable. The system that singles out Israel for ferocious criticism thus works for almost everybody. (When it also accommodates Muslim domestic constituencies in Europe—so much the better).

All this is true not only with regard to Israel's current policies. Since the 1990s, Israel has dramatically modified its policies on some core issues: recognition of and negotiation with the PLO; disengagement from the Gaza Strip; the acceptance, in return for negotiated peace, of the establishment of a Palestinian state; the withdrawal from the Golan Heights; and even the partitioning of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, with minor interludes, hostility toward Israel in the UN and attempts to delegitimize it have only intensified. A peace treaty with the Palestinians supported by Arab states could change this reality. However, since this is inextricably tied to the Palestinian insistence on the "right of return" into Israel, a demand that would terminate the Jewish State, this scenario is unrealistic.

The European Problem

For Israelis, the deepening estrangement of Europe (essentially Western, Northern, and part of Central Europe) is a major problem, far beyond its political and economic significance. It is culturally painful: Jews have made a very prominent contribution to European culture; Zionism was profoundly inspired by European national movements; the State of Israel was modeled after the European nation state; and Jewish Israelis acknowledge that most of the values, institutions, and practices they are proud of were learned from Europe. They adopted Western European core values, although only a small proportion of modern-day Israeli society is of Western European origin.

This estrangement is painful to mainstream Israelis because they expect solidarity from other open societies that share similar pluralistic values. They expect Europeans to understand the predicament of members of a society who exercise self-restraint daily in confronting radicals with values antithetical to those of Europe, who even pride themselves on not having such qualms at all.. The Israelis expect this particularly when Israeli civilians are targeted by suicide bombers or by massive rocket barrages by enemies who openly declare their aim to kill Jews and destroy their state, and when the Jews' collective existence is maligned and delegitimized. It is harder for these Israelis to accept what is widely perceived as a moral betrayal by the European elites than it was to understand the unfriendly European governments that capitulated to Arab pressure and incentives in the past (e.g., the 1967 de Gaulle embargo and the 1973 denial of the US Air Force request to allow its cargo planes to land for refueling or even overfly European territory on their way to Israel to resupply Israel's forces in their hour of need).

Israel's major problem with Europe is not directly with the governments. Most are fair-minded or even friendly and bilateral relations are usually quite good. Only three or four are unfriendly or even overtly hostile. The problem originates with European elites and with the EU, but their attitudes increasingly and inevitably affect bilateral relations. The cumulative effect is extremely harmful; governments cannot, in

the long run, ignore the public sentiment forged by those elites and deviate dramatically from the Union's consensus.

The problem with European elites is a structural one. Israelis and Europeans of goodwill who are alarmed by the present drift and its trajectory often suggest various combinations of Israeli policy changes (e.g. a settlement freeze) and encourage better European understanding of the enormous regional challenges facing Israel. This could be of marginal assistance, but will not address the core issue: What mainstream Israelis believe their country must do to meet these challenges is structurally incompatible with what mainstream European elites believe their society should enshrine. Those Israelis are convinced that following "the European way" will cost them their existential security, while Europeans consider acquiescence to "the Israeli way" a betrayal of the moral and political core of European identity. The clash focuses on two issues: the legitimate use of force and the role of the "international community."

The Legitimate Use of Force: Since World War II, and particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the prevailing European ethos has related to the use of force. Europeans came to lament the barbaric violence that plagued their continent for generations and culminated in the carnage of the first half of the last century. In the new and hopeful age after the defeat of the regimes of Hitler, Stalin, and Brezhnev, Europe proved that dialogue, interdependent cooperation, multiculturalism, and pluralistic tolerance can not only prevent horrendous wars but even produce a political and economic union that transcends narrow-minded concepts of national sovereignty. Europe believes that its success and prosperity can be a model for other nations to emulate. Whereas the use of force in international relations cannot immediately be abolished, civilized nations should gradually phase it out, using it only as a last resort in a multilateral legitimate context, and, above all, insist on "proportionality."

If Israel were to adopt the European concept and standards of proportionality, it would put its very existence in jeopardy and would ultimately be driven to use much more force than it employs under its prevailing strategy. The nature of the threats to Israel, particularly to its population centers, is such that it must constantly use force to prevent unacceptable disruptions of its daily life. Moreover, Israel must use deterrent force—by definition disproportionate to the force used in an individual assault against the Jewish state—to preserve its very existence and to secure a meaningful life for Israelis. This concept of deterrent force and its relevance to the meaning of life requires an explanation. The cultural foundation for that principle is the most difficult for Europeans to digest, let alone accept.

The pre 1948 Zionist community and modern-day Israel, like open societies elsewhere, are about nation-building and about the perpetual constructive endeavors of society-building: the constant quest for a more pluralistic society, a more robust democratic system, a more vibrant and diverse culture, better education, a stronger economy, more creative science and technology, a more developed healthcare

system, etc. This “constructive imperative” is the secret of Israel’s success and the meaning of life for Israelis. Mere existence is, of course, an indispensable precondition for all of this, but in and of itself would not justify the price of living in and defending Israel for those Israelis who really shoulder the burden of making this existence possible.

For this “constructive imperative” to be given a chance to succeed, Israel requires relatively extended periods of time without major wars. This can only be achieved through deterrence. Given the structural instability and violence of its regional environment, compounded by the enormous motivation of its radical Arab enemies, without this deterrence, Israel would find itself in perpetual high-intensity wars that would render the pursuit of these constructive endeavors virtually impossible. During the periods between these clashes—extending from a few years to somewhat less than a decade (1949–56; 1957–67; 1970–73; 1974–82; 1982–91; 1991–2000; 2004–06; 2008–14)—Israel was able to channel most of its energy, resources, and attention constructively inward. This gradually transformed it from a Third-World, poor, and mobilized society to a modern, well-to-do, vibrant democracy on the cutting edge of science and technology. This was so despite the major influx of penniless and often uneducated immigrants from mostly authoritarian societies and the fact that Israel had to shoulder the huge burden of defense expenditures.

The radical Arabs who actively confront Israel—regimes such as those of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, Saddam Hussein, and the Assad dynasty, as well as sub-state entities such as Hizbullah and Hamas—do not need similar respites for this purpose, since they do not display a comparable constructive urge. This deficiency is behind the failure and hopelessness in the region as a whole. For them, perpetual in-house and factional violent oppression, occasionally erupting into major confrontations or civil war, is not an unacceptable reality anyway, regardless of the struggle with Israel. While a perpetual intermediate level of violence is intolerable to Israel, as it distracts it from its constructive *raison d'être*, it is not always unacceptable for its active enemies.

To compel those radicals to cease their violent provocations, a symmetric level of so-called “proportional” counter measures will not do. In that case, they will be motivated to continue and intensify their violence, knowing that for Israel, this exchange is utterly destructive, while for them it is eminently tolerable. To dissuade them from terrorizing and disrupting its meaningful life, Israel must respond to their violence with a measure of force that will make the confrontation intolerable to its instigators. Thus, using a substantive yardstick rather than a simplistic, quantitative one, this response proves to be indeed proportional (though far from symmetric). It is proportional in terms of the differential magnitude of the damage inflicted on each side respectively by violence and in terms of the degree of force necessary to dissuade the perpetrators from employing these violent means. Israel must resort to this kind of response to eventually deter its radical attackers, knowing they also seek to provoke a seemingly

“disproportionate” reaction for propaganda purposes. This is what happened, for instance, in Gaza in the summer of 2014.

This strategy—respond as forcefully as necessary to deter radical Arabs from making life intolerable by making all-out war or limited hostilities intolerable to them—is indispensable to Israel’s survival. An Israeli government that does not pursue it will be considered by its citizens one that has abdicated its most basic responsibility—to protect their lives. No wonder, then, that no government—whether right, center, or left—ever essentially deviated from it (not counting temporary restraint in specific cases). This strategy is as unacceptable in terms of the present European *zeitgeist* as it is crucial for Israeli security. Judging the proportionality of the Israeli response, Europeans are appalled when they count casualties and compare firepower. Israelis, for their part, assess the damage they endured and consider the deterrent effect of their counter measures. Western Europeans, who for decades were spared the experience of war and rampant violence in their cities, can hardly fathom the Israeli perspective. To consider the Israeli point of view, Europeans would also have to bring into the equation the cultural differences between the two battling Middle Eastern societies; to them this would be “racism.” To adopt the European yardstick for proportionality, Israelis would have to disregard the most basic lessons learned from their century-long bitter experience with Arab violence; to them this would be tantamount to national suicide.

The Role of the International Community: As a substitute for war, the brute use of force, domination by the strongest, and the old world order that produced colonialism, two world wars, and a cold war, the new order Europe seeks to establish is a global system based on legitimacy—legitimacy as determined by the “international community.” Europeans are not naïve enough to expect a perfect world in which power politics are altogether abandoned, but they believe that a good measure of what they have achieved regarding the peaceful settlement of differences on their own continent can gradually be established on a global scale. For this to progress, two preconditions are necessary. The first is a structure to provide a broad consensus for legitimate international action. The second is a universally accepted source of inspiration to determine what is fair and legitimate. The existing structure that they deem most acceptable is the UN (and other international organizations); the European view themselves as the best source of inspiration.

This seems to make sense. A new, less domineering order would be enormously beneficial: A body in which all nations are equally represented could provide a wide consensus and a more stable international environment; enlightened Europe is indeed uniquely qualified to serve as inspiration. A closer examination, however, reveals that the weakest link in this concept—the structural flaw in the UN—undermines the entire argument. It may work very well for Arab, Muslim, and Third-World states (at least for the radical and failing among them) but it presents open societies with serious moral and political dilemmas. It is certainly unacceptable to Israel.

We have already demonstrated that for decades, the attitude of the UN and its agencies toward Israel has ranged from unfriendly to hostile to utterly obsessed with condemning and delegitimizing the Jewish State. When Europe seeks to forge a new global order based on this interpretation of the international community—one that Israelis know will have dangerous consequences—their relationship displays structural tension. For Europeans, this international legitimacy is part of their identity. For Israelis, acquiescing to the dictates of the structure Europe seeks to establish would only intensify the existential threats they already face.

Antisemitism: Beyond the structural differences over the use of force and the UN determination of international legitimacy, there is another matter: the resurgence of a mutated strain of antisemitism. This poisons the relationship to a degree that makes productive dialogue even more difficult. Here, again, the problem is not with European governments—most consider antisemitism repugnant and dangerous, and emphatically deplore, reject, and combat it. The problem is with some of the elites, with some deeply rooted public perceptions, and with images that are consciously disseminated by a considerable segment of the media. It arises when a standard is applied to the conduct of the Jewish State that is profoundly different than the one applied to any other state (including European ones). It is evident when the images used to denounce Israel are reminiscent of, and very often identical to, those used in the darkest eras of European antisemitism. Another cruder assault is engendered among a growing immigrant population from Muslim countries.

Obviously, antisemitism is not the most prominent reason behind Israel's poor standing in European public opinion. Legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and the profound differences concerning the use of force and international legitimacy are the dominant factors. But the tone is often set by a blatant double standard and malicious images that are associated with this old curse. In the struggle against terrorism, Israel's armed forces adhere to the highest standards in order to avoid collateral damage to innocent civilians, even when its own centers of population are targeted with thousands of rockets fired from sites embedded among civilians. Israel achieved a much lower ratio of civilian-to-combatant fatalities in this struggle, under much more strenuous circumstances than even the US, Britain, and France have faced. Yet Israel is regularly portrayed in the European media not only as insensitive to casualties sustained by innocent Arab or as criminally negligent, but as downright bloodthirsty. Time and again the images evoke the old theme of the blood libel: the allegation that Jews murder children to use their blood for religious rituals. Even more pervasive is the repulsive allegation that Israel is following in the footsteps of Hitler and exterminating the Palestinian people the way the Nazis annihilated the Jews. These images percolate from the media to the public, where they reinforce old prejudices. For example, a poll in the summer of 2014 revealed that half the German population believes that Israel is conducting a *Vernichtungskrieg*—the Nazi term for a war of extermination—against the Palestinians.

Regardless of its secondary place in explaining the difficulties of Israel's position in European public opinion, the regular allusion to antisemitic images has had a profound effect on the mainstream Israeli attitude to Europe. A decades-long bitter experience has convinced Israelis that Europe (with the noted exception of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Germany on security) cannot be trusted. Moreover, Israelis increasingly believe that Europeans are reverting to their antisemitic traditions. Violent protests during the Gaza War in the summer of 2014, bringing together anti-Israel demonstrators from the "liberal" left, the Fascist right, and the Muslim immigrant community, only served to strengthen this perception. Antisemitic slogans were often chanted at those demonstrations, which also targeted Jewish citizens and institutions. This perception of Europe by many Israelis—and Jewish communities abroad—was further compounded by the emphatically expressed widespread conviction of European Jews that they are no longer safe in their home towns.

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Israel has a major problem with Europe, but no real strategic dilemma. The problem of estrangement stems from Europe's importance: cultural (open societies), political (twenty-eight countries also important to the US) and economic (Israel's largest trading partner). Europe can cause considerable damage to Israel and has already demonstrated its willingness to do so if Israel does not comply with its wishes. The absence of a real strategic dilemma stems from the unbridgeable gap between the minimum that European elites would require to change their position vis-a-vis Israel and what any Israeli government can accept without recklessly jeopardizing Israel's existential needs. Had Israel heeded Europe in 1981 and 2007 and refrained from the "illegal violation of national sovereignty," the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad could have been in possession of nuclear weapons. In 2002, had it avoided the use of "disproportionate" measures in reoccupying Palestinian cities and constructing "the Apartheid Wall," suicide bombers would have made life in Israel intolerable. Not only would most mainstream Israelis reject those European positions, they would not even give them serious consideration. Israelis who advocate similar policies have lost most of their political and moral credibility, aside from within the narrow confines of the *Haaretz* daily and European-funded NGOs.

Assets

To have successfully met such enormous challenges for decades, Israel's assets must have been formidable. By far the most important of these is domestic—the resilience, constructive drive, and ingenuity of Israeli Jewish society. But the international challenges Israel faced over the last half century could not have been overcome without the indispensable support of the US.

American Support

The backing of a major power has always been very important. The Zionist project may not have taken root and secured a critical mass were it not for the British support during the first two decades of the Mandate. Even after the British adopted an anti-Zionist policy in 1939, and in spite of some harsh restrictions, their presence in the country enabled the Jewish *Yishuv* [pre-State Jewish community] to grow stronger and consolidate its political, economic, and even defense institutions. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, it had no major power to lean on. The episode of Soviet support during the 1948/49 war was over; the British were unfriendly and the Americans cold. All powers realized that their regional bread was buttered on the Arab side: strategically (military bases and oil), politically (UN votes and solidarity with Muslim and other post-colonial countries), and economically (oil and markets).

When, in the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union began to embrace the Arab side and heavily arm its allies in the region, Western powers preferred to try luring these Arabs back rather than help Israel defend its very existence. The exception was France. For just over a decade, the war with the Nasir-backed FLN in Algeria led to an interlude of partnership between France and Israel. This alliance lost its strategic rationale in 1962 when France accepted defeat in Algeria; it was pronounced dead when Charles de Gaulle betrayed Israel in 1967. With a few specific exceptions, the US turned a cold shoulder to Israel until the mid-1960s. It was only after Lyndon B. Johnson became president, and particularly after the Six-Day War, that a substantial positive change took place and Israel could look across the Atlantic for major support.

Strategic Considerations

The real breakthrough, however, came in the early 1970s during the Nixon administration and under the guidance of Henry Kissinger. This is when the conceptual foundation was laid for the strategic partnership that has characterized the relationship ever since. Kissinger understood that while American bread was indeed buttered on the Arab side, juxtaposing “the Arabs” and Israel did not reflect the regional strategic reality. The real divide was different: On the one hand, there were radical Arab regimes confronting America; on the other, Kissinger found, both Israel and those Arab regimes that relied on American support, were threatened by the radicals, and were willing to work with the US. A strong Israel with solid American backing can help contain—and occasionally undermine—the radicals; it can also embolden support, and occasionally even save, pro-American Arab regimes, strengthening the West as it did during the Cold War. In 1970, with overt American backing, Israel did both—with Nasir’s regime in the south and with King Hussein’s regime in the east. This strategy culminated in the greatest US Cold War coup, when, in 1973, Kissinger succeeded in changing Egypt’s global orientation from a Soviet one to an American one.

The beauty and effectiveness of this strategy is that the enemies of Israel, and those regimes hostile to the US, are usually one and the same; Israel is interested in confronting them for its own benefit, making it a willing, if not eager, US proxy. Israel had a reputation as a credible regional deterrent, while its local adversaries, which enjoyed Soviet backing, could usually count on American restraint. This pattern proved to be so effective that its core principals survived the end of the Cold War and the change in alliances (Egypt turning friendly, Iran turning hostile), and persisted even during administrations that were unfriendly toward Israel (Jimmy Carter) and all but regionally incompetent (Barack Obama).

The Common Ethos

When strategic interests brought the US and Israel together, the second pillar that upholds the relationship—the common ethos—could fully manifest itself. Israel and the US are democratic regimes that share a Judeo-Christian heritage. Moreover, they also share a formative pioneering ethos that celebrates a community that perseveres in the face of seemingly impossible odds and overcomes hardship in order to build a new and better life in an unfriendly, if not hostile, environment. In both Israel and America, a very vocal segment of the elite—predominantly in the media, academia, and the arts—cleverly ridicules this ethos, characterizing it as archaic and incompatible with fashionable political correctness. Nevertheless, this ethos still resonates with people outside this narrow circle, with voters, and, with rare exceptions (e.g., Presidents Carter and Obama), with decision makers. It is strongly associated with the willingness to use deterrent and decisive force as a legitimate instrument of a policy of self-defense.

It is this combination of the two pillars—common strategic interests and a common ethos—that constitutes the solid foundation of the American–Israeli partnership. American Jews were instrumental in bringing this to the attention of the American people and convincing the liberal wing in American politics to recognize it. For decades, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby in Washington—has been doing a superb job of mobilizing the latent support of Americans of all political stripes to support a strong and mutually beneficial American–Israel partnership. But even the best, most gifted, and most motivated salesperson cannot sell a deficient, malfunctioning, and unwanted product for decades on end. These pillars explain the longstanding robust support of about two thirds of the American people for Israel, and the consequent support in Congress, including under less-than-friendly administrations, and sometimes even in times of major tensions in US–Israeli relations. The fact that AIPAC has until now encountered no serious competition from Arabs and their supporters in the US reflects the lack of wide support for the Arab position among the American people at large, not Arab political incompetence.

For Israel, American support is indispensable. Were it not for Washington’s political backing, Israel would be facing either crippling UN sanctions or dictates that would undermine its deterrence and threaten its existential interests. The access to American cutting-edge military hardware and technology

helps Israel maintain its qualitative defensive edge over its enemies. While US financial assistance is declining in significance due to the growth of the Israeli economy, this growth itself was made possible to some extent thanks to American assistance in much more difficult times. On the physico-political level, the time proven American commitment to the Jewish State is a major factor in Israel's deterrent posture and in easing Israeli existential anxiety.

For the US, obviously, Israel is immeasurably less significant than America is to Israel. However, in one of the most unstable and violent regions of the world, Israel is still important. This is so, despite the impending energy self-sufficiency of the US, which hopes to allocate fewer resources and pay less attention to the Middle East. This would enable the US to "pivot toward Asia," while still maintaining Israel as a strong ally in the Middle East. Indeed, Israel is one of the very few, if not the only, ally that combines six precious qualities: It is strong, stable, responsible, determined, invariably pro-American, and never expects American troops to fight for it. Most American allies can claim only three to four of those six. The Israeli commitment to the second pillar—the common ethos—is also secure. Contrary to journalistic urban legend, Israeli democracy and pluralism are not on the wane but are actually deeper and stronger than ever. Contrary to the whining of the right wing, Israeli acquiescence to a painful partition and the establishment of a Palestinian state is in line with Zionist values and history and does not indicate declining steadfastness or resilience.

The Resilience of Israeli Society

Since the beginning of the Zionist presence in the Land of Israel some 140 years ago, the Jewish *Yishuv* was confronted with an extremely harsh environment. Ever-present violent Arab opposition was only one of the hardships. Two major others were a desolate land and enduring the most difficult stage of an unprecedented cultural, social and political revolutionary movement. The desolate land presented inexperienced yet determined farmers with the challenge of modernizing agriculture in the most inhospitable parts of a backward province. The revolutionary movement consisted of a small minority, challenging the entire Jewish establishment to transform a way of life that had evolved over two thousand years of exile and to substitute it with what was perceived at the time as utopia. Only the very resilient could and did stay the course.

During the Mandate period, violent Arab opposition erupted periodically with ever-growing ferocity and in November 1947 presented the *Yishuv* with an existential threat. A few months later, in May 1948, the invasion of five Arab armies brought the Jews to the brink of extinction. In the war that followed, the emerging State of Israel decisively defeated the local forces and invading enemies, at horrendous cost: One percent of the population was killed. Elated but exhausted, the newborn entity faced the herculean task of absorbing penniless Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees either ousted or fleeing from Arab lands, who soon doubled and then tripled the fledgling state's population.

More challenging than the physical absorption was the establishment of the very basis for nation building—turning the Zionist utopia into everyday reality: molding a national community out of the Jewish conglomerate that did not even have a common modern history, land, or language. This collective was no longer the few hundred thousand in the relatively select, highly motivated, and mobilized *Yishuv* society. The existential Zionist question was whether the millions would coalesce into a dedicated and resilient nation, and would go on to develop a free, modern, and prosperous open society in the Jewish state.

To meet these formidable challenges—domestic, regional, and international—five qualities seem to be essential: a commitment to nation building; a strong consensus in the center of the political and social systems; a pluralistic structure that safeguards political freedoms; mainstream societal solidarity; and a robust economy.

The “Constructive Imperative”

The supreme importance of nation building explains the “constructive imperative” mentioned above (apropos deterrent power). An Israel that is not continuously engaged in the process of nation building in this sense would be unacceptable to its own people. Resilience in the face of Arab violence is not an end in itself. It is meaningless unless it is merely a precondition for developing a better society. In the overall national security perspective, the decisive question and the ultimate yardstick is the nature and magnitude of this contribution, and its perpetuation: Has Israel, since its inception, been making consistent and impressive progress toward building a free, cohesive, secure, and affluent society, in spite of its enormous regional, international and domestic challenges?

The first and most important national decision in this context may not even have been a conscious one, but the very clear pattern of cumulative individual decisions for almost a century makes it, nevertheless, a *de facto* national strategy. At the core of this strategy is the consistent preference for a free, democratic, and functioning Jewish society over the quest for the full measure of the perceived national rights of the Jewish people. This preference is reflected in the studied reluctance to settle the biblical heartland of Israel (most of Judea and Samaria and the old city of Jerusalem) and the focus instead on establishing the Zionist enterprise in the coastal plain, the valleys, and the Upper Galilee—those areas with little or no link to ancient Jewish history: Zionism almost without Zion.

In the Mandate period, the *Yishuv* did not have the resources to take over this heartland, but in the winter of 1949, at the end of the War of Independence, Israeli Defense Forces could have “liberated” it in a matter of a few days. Ben-Gurion prevented this, not because he doubted the historic justice of such a liberation or its value in terms of Israel’s defense, but because he was justifiably obsessed with the herculean nation-building challenge mentioned above that faced the newborn state. He understood that incorporating the Arab population of this heartland into the Jewish State would subvert all the

constructive efforts. At best, if Israel were allowed to keep all the territories it gained, securing the full measure of its perceived national patrimony, it would have lost its *raison d'être*—the establishment of a sovereign, open, and modern society in which the Jewish people in exile could be ingathered, and which would offer them a productive life in their ancient homeland.

When Israel came to occupy the territories from which it had been attacked in 1967, Ben-Gurion's successors in the Labor government immediately incorporated east Jerusalem into the Jewish State. The government sought to implement considerable security-oriented changes to the border in the Jordan Valley. However, it was again willing to trade the biblical heartland for peace with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The government acknowledged the high price, both in terms of history and security, of relinquishing this territory. It justified its willingness to take such a step by citing the overriding imperative of nation building, codenamed "a Jewish democratic state." The right wing ascended to power in 1977, espousing the ideology of a "Greater Israel," and sought to incorporate Judea and Samaria into Israel proper. Despite that, and the subsequent failure of the Oslo "peace process" and a painful Palestinian terrorist campaign, a majority of Israeli Jews still supports a re-partition of the land. Most do so not because they believe Palestinians deserve a state or will be satisfied once they obtain one, but because they know that Israeli society will only be undermined if it continues to rule over millions of Palestinians. In 2009, the leader of the right wing committed Israel to a "two-state solution." On the one hand, the radical Knesset members of his own ruling Likud party present a formidable, arguably insurmountable, impediment to the realization of this kind of arrangement, if and when Netanyahu tries to pursue it. On the other hand, correctly reading the sentiment of their own constituency and mainstream Israeli public opinion, they presumably know that their uncompromising positions would make Likud unelectable as a ruling party.

Convergence to the Center of the Political Spectrum

This preference for the constructive cause is part of a much broader phenomenon that offers a good yardstick for long-term national resilience: the convergence to the center of the political spectrum. Societies that have been subjected to protracted and massive violence or other traumatic crises tend either to radicalize or to capitulate at the next overwhelming challenge. This is essentially what happened, for instance, to the German and French societies after World War I. Since 1930, a coalition forged by one party—Mapai and its offshoots—dominated Israel's political scene for almost half a century, alongside a relatively small right wing and a somewhat larger left. On Arab-Israeli issues, this coalition was centrist in the sense that it supported a historic compromise west of the River Jordan. Parts of it masqueraded as left leaning, with an ever-diminishing Socialist element. When it was replaced by a right-of-center coalition, its leader, Menachem Begin, heavily settled the heartland but also quickly concluded a peace treaty with Egypt.

The ill-fated war in Lebanon, although a product of deficient statesmanship on the part of the prime minister more than that of a radical ideology, ushered in a new era. The 1980s and '90s witnessed a very destructive zero-sum-game split between equally strong right-wing and left-wing political blocs that also polarized the society. It was only in the beginning of the new millennium that the traumatic eruption of Palestinian terrorism and the disillusionment with the Peace Process reverted the Israeli mainstream to a structure similar to the one that prevailed between the early 1930s and the late '70s—that of a very wide consensus in the middle of the political spectrum—this time with a relatively weak left and a somewhat stronger right. This new centrist consensus is so robust because it rests on the acceptance of both the most important paradigms of the old right and that of the traditional left. That of the right is, bluntly put, “Don’t trust the Arabs; don’t expect peace.” The left-oriented equivalent is “partition the land so as not to control millions of Palestinians.” Whereas the Israeli political system is often increasingly polarized and dysfunctional, this is not the case with the society at large. Both components of the new center seek “a Jewish democratic state” and are engaged in a lively—sometime ferocious—debate concerning the balance between the two elements of this formula.

Political Freedoms and Pluralism

This tradition of consensus and lively debate over existential issues is far from self-evident. It is particularly difficult in a society that has experienced generations of war, perpetual animosity and violence, encirclement, boycott, isolation, and delegitimization, relies so heavily on its armed forces and maintains general conscription. By any yardstick of political science or common sense, it should have become a mobilized regimented society, if not downright authoritarian, militaristic, and oppressive. This is especially to be expected considering the fact that only a small minority of the millions of immigrants that settled in Israel came from open societies with a democratic heritage.

Israel came into being in 1948 without civil war, with a democratically elected government and an independent judiciary. However, it started out with the mobilized characteristics of the *Yishuv* society: It was led by a charismatic and very powerful “father of the nation” figure; most of its Arab citizens were kept under military administration for nearly two decades. Since then, Israel’s society and political system have continually evolved, moving toward greater pluralism and transparency. By almost every parameter, each passing decade has been successively more open and tolerant than the preceding one (with the exception of some walks of life that are under the purview of religion). This process of liberalization was not a product of a social revolution, as was the case in France or the US in the 1960s. With a few noted exceptions, it evolved voluntarily, often with the people in power initiating the restrictions that eroded their exclusive control.

Despite the negative impact of the protracted occupation since 1967, only an ignorant or biased observer would deny that Israel in the new millennium is dramatically more pluralistic and tolerant than it

was in the late 1960s or '70s, and as open, as a whole, as any Western democracy. The occasional nostalgia in some narrow circles for the “good old” early years of the state is based on an extreme case of selective memory. Predictions of doom on the right concerning liberalization causing “national disintegration” or false alarms on the left concerning creeping Fascism are, in both cases, the radicals’ instrument of political mobilization, and are considered by mainstream Israelis equally ludicrous.

The armed forces indeed play a very major role in Israeli society. Recognizing the threat of militarism, the IDF was designed as a unique institution, with precious little non-operational discipline (there is no equivalent in Hebrew to the term “sir” the way it is used in the US military and in other armies of democratic states) and informal relations between the ranks and the junior and senior officers. A major study of Israel’s world-renowned excellence in innovation (*A Startup Nation*) credited the culture of the open exchange of ideas in the military with engendering a hub of creative thinking. Members of an Arabic-speaking minority in Israel who have chosen to serve and share in shouldering the security burden (the Druze) repeatedly express the hope that Israeli society as a whole will emulate the IDF in treating them with the same respect and comradery. General conscription (with the exception of Arabs and ultra-Orthodox, who may both volunteer) and the longstanding tradition of general conscription of non-religious Jewish women make the emergence of a macho junta culture very unlikely. During their military service, young people from very different backgrounds meet and often bond for life. When retired generals enter politics, they position themselves all over the spectrum, although with a relatively heavier concentration to the left of center.

The Society

Jewish cohesiveness and solidarity cannot, in the long run, rest primarily on a common ethnic and religious origin or on a common threat. To forge a free and resilient nation, Israelis must internalize the idea that the Jews who have chosen to live in Israel are much more than a conglomeration of diverse groups of people whose forefathers shared a historic narrative and lived as Jews in their separate countries of origin. Such cohesiveness must be anchored in the deep-rooted conviction that Jews in Israel share a much more comprehensive solidarity than their forefathers did, and that their identification with the cultural group of their country of origin is constantly diminishing in favor of their Israeli Jewish identity. This process was the essence of Zionist ideology. While from the ideological standpoint this was considered self-evident and even inevitable, on the practical level, even decades after the establishment of the state, this outcome was by no means certain to take root.

Originating in dozens of countries and a wide variety of backgrounds, Israeli society was beset by many problems but by far the most difficult challenge was the merging of Western Ashkenazi Jews with Jews of Middle Eastern origin (*Mizrachim*). Western Jews, predominantly those from Eastern and Central Europe, gave birth to the idea of political Zionism and molded the *Yishuv* society in their own image. The influx of Holocaust survivors immediately after the establishment of Israel fortified their hegemony. Most

of the new immigrants from Arab states (with the notable exception of Iraq and Egypt) came from a less developed background. They were looked down upon by European Jews and occupied the lower echelons of society in terms of their social, economic, and professional standing and prestige. This was especially true for those who came from Morocco, bereft of their own elites, who mainly settled in France and Canada. These new immigrants were often regarded as “Arab Jews”—Jews by religion but Arab by culture—not only by Arab observers of Israel, but by many Israelis of European origin as well. Obviously, they did not mean that as a compliment.

By and large, Middle Eastern Jews very often felt that their contribution was grossly underestimated, and that they were cheated by the dominant Ashkenazim out of the tangible and intangible rewards they richly deserved. This grudge was constantly rumbling in the background of the social and political scene until it erupted in the 1981 elections as a major dividing force in Israeli society. Had it continued to fester and escalate, it could have ripped Israeli society down the middle and presented a major threat to Israel’s social cohesion and resilience.

A generation later, it is now clear that Israeli society has been saved by an unexpected instrument—a wave of Mizrahi–Ashkenazi marriages that affects almost every extended family among Israeli Jews, to the point where collecting separate statistical data about these two fast coalescing groups has become increasingly difficult. This wave, in turn, was to a large extent a product of the willing adoption by Middle Eastern Jews of core Western European values (primarily concerning pluralism and the status of women) just as Eastern European Jews did a few generations earlier.

The Economy

Israel started out in 1948 as a poor county, compelled to institute tough austerity measures. The influx of immigrants that tripled its population with mainly indigent Jews initially added a major economic burden. Israel’s partly socialist economic structure, originally useful in constructing the *Yishuv’s* basic social institutions, became increasingly problematic. The exceptionally high level of defense spending remained a constant millstone around its neck. In spite of all this, an essentially responsible policy provided constant and relatively high growth until the early 1970s. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel dramatically enlarged its armed forces, catapulting its defense expenditure to about one quarter of its GDP—sometimes reaching as high as one third—and took loans of unprecedented magnitude from the Americans to finance it. At the same time, with quadrupling oil prices and the loss of the Sinai oil fields, its energy bill soared. Mismanagement of the economy compounded these problems to produce the “lost decade.”

In the early 1980s, the peace treaty with Egypt and the ongoing Iran–Iraq war allowed Israel to downsize its armed forces as the military threat was considerably diminished. A more responsible economic policy adopted in 1985 made full use of this strategic improvement. American military

assistance in the wake of the Camp David accords helped cover the defense expenditure and US economic assistance paid for loans taken in the 1970s. After the mid-1980s, the economy was able to recuperate and make full use of Israel's most important asset—its human capital, specifically the innovative spirit and the entrepreneurial instinct of its citizens. Beginning in 1989, the enormous influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of whom were highly educated and possessed technical skills, further bolstered this process. When the lucrative high-tech revolution came along, Israel was well positioned to benefit from it.

By the onset of the new millennium, Israel had already joined the OECD “first world” of affluent developed countries. After recuperating from the harsh economic effects of the Second Intifada, Israel was recognized as a cutting edge technological hub—a “Start-up Nation”—in which international investment drives up the stock exchange. This is so even in times of war, when Israelis in major cities are compelled to spend time in bomb shelters. Some of the problems of the Israeli economy are “rich-man’s problems.” Others are more serious and are not dealt with adequately, but, as with other Western democracies, Israel has both the resources and the proven ability to cope with them when the political will is there. A good indication of the state of the economy is the fact that, despite a defense expenditure that is three to four times higher than that of European economies, a tiny market, and many ongoing boycotts, Israel survived the global recession of the new millennium with a higher rate of growth and a lower rate of unemployment than many other Western democracies.

Both in comparative terms and in terms of historical perspective, it is important to add a further observation. The transformation of Israel from a poor to a relatively prosperous state was, above all, a product of Israel's own efforts. American assistance, however significant, accounts for only a small part of the difference between Israel's defense expenditure and that of other democracies. While the aid to Israel is overt, Europeans enjoy huge aid packages through NATO. Under European conditions, Israel would have done much better. Having accumulated critical mass, the future looks more promising than ever.

* * *

The very positive macro picture of Israeli society presented here should not be misinterpreted as the denial or downplaying of very serious shortcomings and failures. One of the most relevant to this discussion is the fact that segments of Israeli society, particularly, but not exclusively, on the religious right, are challenging the democratic and pluralistic nature of Israel. Another is the fact that it has taken decades for Israel to acquiesce to a partition of the land west of the Jordan River. This partition would result in a two-state structure that would rid Israel of its control over millions of Palestinians, while freeing up resources to pursue the constructive imperative. Even with that acquiescence, Israelis still have no operative plan or realistic timetable in sight that will effectively respond to the ever-growing costs of population evacuation beyond the security fence that such disengagement in the West Bank will require.

Another major problem with no solution in sight is that of two significant segments of Israeli society—mainstream Muslim Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews—who are estranged from the Jewish mainstream. Both groups support leaders who are determined to keep their followers alienated from mainstream Israeli society. The educational system, a crucially important one, is deeply flawed, some islands of excellence notwithstanding. The Israeli economic system has gone too far in deepening inequality and has failed to bring down the cost of living, particularly housing prices. The wide gap between center and periphery is intolerable in such a tiny country.

All this does not weaken, let alone undermine, the basic argument presented here. The commitment to the constructive imperative does not mean conclusive success or perfection in all major endeavors. An overall impasse, even far less comprehensive and depressing than the kind most Arab societies are experiencing, would have discouraged Israelis to the point of putting the entire Zionist project at risk. These shortcomings and failures, however, are of the kind Israel has successfully overcome in the past—notably the pre-1985 economic problems and the Mizrachi–Ashkenazi rift of a generation ago. Mainstream Israelis today are confident that these and other problems can be addressed, at least partially, in the future.

Conclusion

To judge the state of a nation in the broadest possible context of national security, a net assessment of its response versus major challenges is essential. The fact that these challenges are manageable is no consolation if the response to them is inadequate. On the other hand, seemingly insurmountable difficulties may be overcome by the judicious use of a formidable set of assets. Some Arab societies have faced difficulties such as three to four decades of “colonialism light.” However, they failed the ultimate test of nation building even though they held vast economic assets (huge resources of oil money) and a great cultural heritage upon which to fall back. Others in the post-colonial era suffered much more and, nevertheless, managed to do much better. For example, India, which endured centuries of British rule, including the worst kind of colonial exploitation, and which had to contend with a much more difficult social structure, including a breathtaking variety of cultures and languages as well as a horrendous caste system, demonstrated enormous constructive determination and quite rightly expects a much better future.

The net assessment of Israel’s national security is essentially positive, not because the challenges are less than overwhelming or because the assets can be taken for granted. This can be attributed to many independent decisions—consistently assigning supreme priority to the constructive imperative and making heartbreaking compromises at the expense of other national interests. This is what has kept Israeli society productive and resilient and has made the alliance with the US both possible and long-lasting. There are, of course, constant temptations and threats. One major temptation is for Israel to use its powerful position to secure all of what it perceives to be what the Jewish State rightfully deserves, forgetting that it only

became powerful when it forsook it. One major threat is that Arab provocations will compel Israel to take seemingly well justified counter measures that will, in turn, undermine the essence of its social priorities and the value system that has worked so well for generations.

The Israeli national security structure will be robust only as long as Israelis continue to make the right decisions along these lines; it is fragile in the sense that the challenges are so multifaceted and overwhelming that the entire structure rests almost exclusively on the quality of these decisions.