

The IDF and the Israeli Spirit

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Articles & Testimony

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I know of no other country in the world whose existence as an independent, sovereign state has been called into question for so long and in so many different circles as has Israel's. This continuous existential challenge will be the foremost problem with which Israel and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are going to have to contend for the foreseeable future.

As Israel approaches its sixtieth anniversary, it can pride itself on the wonderful achievements that have established it as a regional power. But its right to exist as an independent Jewish state is still a matter of dispute.

As we begin our examination of the balance of power vis-à-vis the State of Israel, we are immediately struck by its physical dimensions: Israel's population and area are very small, and its natural resources paltry—there is even a lack of water. And yet Israel is still a formidable regional power. How?

The key to Israel's strength lies in its human resources. Human capital is the key, first of all, to the country's strength in the humanities, culture, poetry, music, and theater; but also to its scientific and technological strength, especially evident in high-tech, medicine, physics, and aviation. In each of these areas, economic power derives not from natural resources but from human ones.

The same can be said for Israel's military strength. Israel has developed a sophisticated military force, which rests on state-of-the-art weapons that are themselves put at the disposal of top-flight soldiers and commanders. Today's IDF uses the most advanced weaponry on earth, excelling in its precision, mobility, durability, design, intelligence collection, and information management. Superior intelligence enables the IDF to locate low-level targets such as terrorists, to pass on the information in real time to decision makers (whether a commanding officer, a pilot, or the chief of staff), and to hit the target in the most accurate and surgical way possible. These capabilities are translated into a substantial military force, and not only in the sphere of anti-terrorist warfare. Both the development of weapons and the ability to put them to use can be based only on a high level of human capital.

The nature of the threats confronting the IDF has, of course, changed over time. From the 1948 War of Independence through the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, the IDF faced the combined Arab armies in high-intensity conventional warfare. Indeed, the Yom Kippur War was the last conventional war initiated by the Arab states against Israel, the last war between armies.

The IDF's victories in these wars forced Arab leaders to realize that their chances of defeating the IDF on the traditional battlefield were limited. Some of them, like Egypt and Jordan, turned to political agreements. Others chose to engage in forms of unconventional warfare: Sub-conventional warfare like terror, guerilla warfare, and attacks on civilian targets with primitive rockets; or super-conventional warfare, such as the development of medium- and long-range missiles or biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. The result is that while the IDF developed a powerful deterrent and a strong threat-detection capability with regard to conventional threats, in

recent years the IDF has had to contend instead with Palestinian terror, Hezbollah guerillas, Qassam and Katyusha rockets, Iraqi al-Hussein missiles (of which some forty were fired at Israel during the 1991 Gulf War), Syrian Scuds, Iranian Shihab missiles, as well as weapons of mass destruction in Syria and Iran, and the potential nuclear threat from Iran.

Today, Israel has had successes not only in dealing with conventional threats, but also, to some extent, in the area of weapons of mass destruction. Israel's nuclear deterrent has stood the test of over fifty years. Even when facing defeat in the 1967 Six Day War, for instance, the Egyptians refrained from attacking Israel with chemical weapons, though they did not hesitate to use them in their 1962 war with Yemen. The fear of Israeli reprisal, moreover, is the only reasonable explanation for Saddam Hussein's not attacking Israel with the chemical and biological warheads which were at his disposal during the 1991 Gulf War.

Indeed, the different threats that Israel and the IDF have confronted during the last few years have a single common denominator: Each attempts to avoid a head-on confrontation with the IDF, and each is aimed directly at Israel's civilian population. In fact, a common element is shared by the lone suicide bomber planning to blow himself up in Jerusalem, the Katyusha missile aimed at Kiryat Shemona, the Qassam rocket aimed at Sderot, and the al-Hussein missiles that fell on Tel Aviv. Behind each of these attacks on heavily populated civilian centers there stands a mindset common to all of Israel's enemies: They see Israelis as a war-weary "society of plenty," seeking only a life of comfort and luxury, uncertain of themselves and of their inner convictions, led by people who do not believe in the nation's willingness to fight.

The inescapable conclusion from this, however, is that Israel's security no longer really depends on the number of planes, tanks, or artillery it has—though these will continue to act as indispensable deterrents at the level of conventional warfare—but on the strength of Israeli society, and its ability to face these threats without yielding.

The battles that Israel must now engage in, and will face for the foreseeable future, test not Israel's military power but its civic resilience. The Arab nations began raising the question of Israel's societal strength in the 1980s, when Israel was counting its casualties following its withdrawal from most of Lebanon in the wake of the 1982-1985 Operation Peace for Galilee. The discussion gathered strength after the May 1985 prisoner exchange in which three Israeli POWs were returned in exchange for the release of 1,150 terrorists. Later, our enemies were able to adduce further examples of Israeli weakness: In their telling, the Oslo accords were the result of the first Intifada (1987-1991); the Hebron withdrawal agreement was signed as a result of the 1996 "Temple Mount tunnel" riots; and Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip followed unbearable Palestinian pressure in the so-called "second Intifada," the terror campaign launched by the Palestinians in September 2000.

In the case of the most recent war, Israel could have made the opposite case. Israel's determined stand against the wave of Palestinian terror, especially during the period between the Jenin operation of April 2002 and the announcement of the decision to withdraw from Gaza made in December 2003, severely undermined the Arabs' hypothesis about the societal strength of Israel. With the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, however, Palestinian terror organizations such as Hamas and Fatah-Tanzim, which were ready to accept an unconditional cease-fire in the summer of 2003, interpreted the decision on unilateral withdrawal from Gaza as an Israeli "breakdown," to be exploited as a "victory for the resistance."

Israel's current strategic security balance may thus be summed up as follows: A generally successful deterrent against conventional threats and super-conventional threats like weapons of mass destruction, combined with failure of deterrence on the sub-conventional level—terror attacks and tactical missiles—which has resulted in an ongoing war of attrition against Israeli civilians.

What security threats will Israel confront in the future?

The acceptance of the State of Israel on the part of its neighbors as an independent Jewish state requires a long-term perspective on two fronts. On the one hand, Israeli society must remain steadfast over what will necessarily be a period of conflict spanning many years; on the other hand, Israel must always keep its eye on societal and moral changes that have to take place among its enemies before reconciliation can ever really occur. Such a process is by its nature lengthy, and can span over one or more generations.

The September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington led many Americans to understand that in order to avoid future attacks it will be necessary to deal with the roots of terrorism, in other words, to confront not only terrorist operations, but to bring an end to the kind of education that nurtures terror. This explains America's well-considered demands for democracy in the Middle East and for educational and social reform among Israel's neighbors.

Indeed, anti-terror warfare is important, but it addresses only the ability to commit terrorist acts rather than the roots of terrorism. Even when we succeeded in bringing about a significant decrease in the number of wanted terrorists, the phenomenon of terrorism always struck me as a kind of bottomless pit, with an endless stream of new candidates always ready to fill the shoes of the old. Of course, the pit does have a bottom: It is full of three-year-olds masquerading as suicide bombers, nine-year-olds writing essays in praise of the suicide-bomber death cult, and fourteen-year-olds whose greatest ambition is to become a martyr.

The Palestinian education system continues to ignore Israel's right to exist as an independent Jewish state, uses the term "occupation" with regard to the entire historic land of Israel "from the River to the Sea," and denies any connection between the Jewish people and their ancestral homeland. An educational system of this kind is preparing Palestinians not for conciliation, but for war. The dictatorial regimes around us prefer to perpetuate the conflict and to externalize their failings, especially in the direction of Israel and the United States. They are certainly not interested in the kind of education that would lead to a more peaceable attitude.

The enlightened world, with the United States taking the lead, must continue to make financial assistance to Arab states, and especially the Palestinian Authority, conditional upon fundamental educational reform. The first step should be a ban on incitement to hatred in government-controlled mosques and media, followed by significant changes in school textbooks. This is not to say that Israel should take a paternalistic or authoritarian attitude by imposing educational reform on Palestinians by force. The path is not so much one of conversion but of persuasion. We ought not actively intervene except for encouraging cooperation and educational encounters between Jews and Palestinians not just encounters in which the Palestinians accuse the Jews and the Jews accuse themselves, but encounters which take the Zionist self-understanding as a legitimate point of departure.

As long as no such changes are forthcoming, however, no demands can be made on Israel, since any Israeli concession immediately becomes a new baseline from which hostilities are undertaken, as the Palestinians have repeatedly proven over the last decade. Yet Israel can act to encourage the democratization of the region, especially in the Palestinian Authority. It is, after all, in Israel's interest to be involved in the Middle East, rather than to live in permanent isolation within the region.

The challenges facing Israel's military are no less formidable. In the area of conventional warfare, Israel will continue to maintain a military built on a regular army and reserves, on a scale that addresses the potential threat. To maintain our competitive edge, however, will require continued investment in our human capital, by nurturing future generations of scientists, engineers, and technicians—those who will develop the IDF's technological infrastructure, its security industry, and its roots in both the civilian economy and in academia.

As far as unconventional warfare is concerned, Israel must maintain its deterrent capability and make every effort to prevent our enemies from acquiring nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran poses an extremely serious threat; such a

capability in the hands of an extremist regime that does not hide its intentions regarding Israel would fundamentally alter the strategic balance in the region. Such a regime could provide a “nuclear umbrella” for terrorists and could radically undermine democratization in moderate regimes. This could also trigger a regional arms race, in which other regimes seek to acquire nuclear weapons as well.

For this reason, the recent speeches of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad must be taken with utmost seriousness. In his messianic Shiite worldview, the arrival of the “Hidden Imam”—the messiah—can and should be hastened through practical measures. When he was the mayor of Tehran, he invested in initiatives to prepare for the day of the arrival of the Hidden Imam. As a disciple of the Ayatollah Yazdi, he believes that the precondition for the coming of the Hidden Imam is the destruction of the State of Israel. This is a genuine belief, and any attempt to dismiss his words as mere posturing in order to garner internal support or as simple baiting misses their meaning and underestimates his intentions. Once again, the Jews stand face-to-face with a leader possessing a radical messianic worldview, who sees the annihilation of Israel as a necessary stage in defeating the West; except that this time, he may soon have the most powerful of means to achieve his aims. Israel must view the Iranian threat as profound and existential, and respond accordingly.

Indeed, the Iranians are looking to undermine moderate regimes even as we speak. If they had their way, the Jordanian king would no longer be alive, and other regimes in the region, including in the Persian Gulf, would fall. Most of the terror directed at Israel today is funded by Iran. Although Hamas has its own fundraising apparatus, it has received a great deal of money in recent years from Iran. “With regards to the challenges ahead of us, we count on an expanded role by our Iranian brothers in Palestine,” Hamas political leader Khaled Mashal said in a recent joint press conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki. Meanwhile, the Fatah Tanzim fighters are funded by Iran, and of course Hezbollah receives tens of millions of dollars to work and act from within Lebanon and to operate Palestinian terror in Gaza. Today a large part of the terrorist activity is moving to the Gaza Strip, and the Iranians are behind all of it. (This is also true regarding many attacks directed against the coalition forces in Iraq.)

To put it bluntly, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who never talked about the Hidden Imam, was nothing short of a moderate compared to Ahmadinejad, whose resolve to obtain nuclear weapons is closely related to his messianic vision of defeating the West. There is a battle within the Muslim world as to who will lead this global jihad: Will it be Osama Bin Laden, or one of his deputies like Ayman al-Zawahiri or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; or will it be the Iranians? Israel, it must therefore be emphasized, is far from alone in this war. For many years I have struggled with the challenge of convincing people in other countries that they, too, are in danger. As head of the IDF’s intelligence branch I went to Washington in 1996 in order to convince the Americans that the Iranians aspired to obtain nuclear weapons. Back then I found few people who were willing to listen. The good news, such as it is, is that in the last few years not only the Americans but even the Europeans have come to understand the Iranian threat.

Have they truly internalized its severity? Not completely. When I visited Europe as IDF chief of staff not long ago, several officials said to me: “So what? We endured a conflict with the Soviets, and they also had nuclear capability.” And yet it should be clear that the Soviets are not the Iranians, and Europe is not the Middle East. It is to be hoped that the Americans and the Europeans will not fail to recognize the Iranian threat, and that they will take steps toward imposing diplomatic and economic sanctions. But Israel must prepare for the possibility that these steps will not be effective. And if we are not for ourselves, who will be for us?

The challenge posed to Israel by sub-conventional warfare, however, is the most difficult of all. I have already pointed out that in this sphere we do not enjoy adequate threat-detection or an adequate deterrent, and that it is not enough to deal with terror through military means alone. It must be dealt with at its roots.

But there is no chance of such a change taking place so long as we appear to be giving in to terror. So long as those who are hostile to us believe they can achieve their aims through violence, they will continue to try to do so.

The greatest difficulty here is internal. Israel's political polarization, and the lack of a national consensus with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are vulnerabilities that have been well exploited by our enemies. Even when Yasser Arafat began his terror war in September 2000, we argued—and there are those who continue to argue to this day—over whether this war was a premeditated assault or a spontaneous, authentic grassroots uprising. This debate took place even within the Israeli cabinet, which could not decide whether to see Arafat as an enemy or a peace partner. The issue was resolved only after the Passover Eve attack on the Park Hotel in Netanya in March 2002, following a year and a half of terrorist bombings. If recent books on the subject—some of which accuse the IDF of escalating this war—are any indicator, the debate has still not been fully resolved. This debate is indicative of a profound confusion, not only with regard to this particular war, but with regard to the Zionist narrative itself.

We may best view Arafat's decision to go to war as the third Palestinian refusal of a two-state solution. The first refusal was to reject the Peel Commission's recommendations in 1937, the second was to dismiss the United Nations partition plan in 1947, and the third was to rebuff the offer made by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000. Each partition proposal accepted by the Jewish leadership has led to a wave of Palestinian violence. This continual state of refusal suggests a profound unwillingness on the part of the Palestinians to accept any territorial compromise, and, more deeply, to accept Israel's right to exist as an independent Jewish state.

This view of things exposes a deep asymmetry, and in a rather harsh light. The overwhelming majority of Jewish leaders since the dawn of Zionism have been amenable to territorial compromise and the partition of the land; no Palestinian leadership has ever proven willing to accept the same. And the rise of Hamas to power in the Palestinian parliamentary elections suggests that the Palestinian public, too, shows no sign of accepting it any time soon.

To complicate matters, the Israeli public debate, including the core of the decision-making elites, has been permeated by post-Zionist claims which are aimed at undermining the Zionist narrative. Some of these claims reflect an ideology that repudiates the belief in a Jewish state; some are a product of historical ignorance; some reflect a kind of wishful thinking; some a reflexive self-incrimination as a response to perceived helplessness; and some simply reflect the poll-driven considerations of political manipulation. Both in Israel and in universities around the world, there is a great deal of ignorance on this question. Many students, for example, believe that in 1948 there was a Palestinian state, and that in the War of Independence Israeli colonialists conquered it and occupied the land.

All this has had an impact on the government's decisions over the last decade, including those that affect the deployment of IDF forces. The less of a political consensus there is, the less room the IDF has to maneuver. As chief of staff, on quite a few occasions I refrained from carrying out an operation even when I believed it to be moral and correct, because of the cost it could be expected to carry in the internal Israeli debate.

The internal Israeli debate as to the justice of the Zionist enterprise may be mainly a civilian one, but the officers and soldiers in the IDF want to know what they are risking their lives for. When the validity of an independent Jewish state is called into question, officers and enlisted men alike may find themselves standing on shaky ground. As chief of staff I attached great importance to reinforcing this foundation. I initiated educational programs on those issues not subject to open political debate, aiming to raise awareness regarding Israel's past, to deepen the roots of the soldiers' knowledge of the country, to educate them to become good citizens of a democratic state, and to instill the values necessary to allow them to defeat their enemies while preserving their humanity. It is with this challenge, too, that the IDF will have to contend for the foreseeable future.

The problem of Israeli solidarity also has a socio-economic side. Israel's wide income disparities do not make matters easy for the IDF. A situation in which some soldiers arrive at their base in private cars while others go home to empty refrigerators does not contribute to a sense of unity and shared sacrifice. The IDF cannot bridge socio-economic gaps, but it can do its part in aiding poorer communities, as it does with its Atidim program, and in

providing financial assistance to needy soldiers, especially those who are serving in combat units. This allows them to continue serving without having to worry about supporting their families.

Needless to say, the fact that some communities do not serve in the army at all, and the unequal distribution of the security burden this entails, also undermines the nation's sense of solidarity. The question of sharing the burden in general, and reserve military duty in particular, will continue to pose a challenge. The IDF has consistently supported sharing the responsibility for Israel's security in a more equal way, although political constraints have prevented this. In lieu of this, the right thing to do is to honor and reward those who bear more than their share of the burden. Although these challenges are not, strictly speaking, military ones, they will have a direct impact on Israel's solidarity and security in the future.

Israeli solidarity is also affected by the degree to which the rule of law and democratic principles are upheld in society. In a country where "law" has come to resemble a beautiful book on a shelf—it is read and used when the need arises, but at other times it is merely of ornamental value—it is of supreme importance that IDF commanders set an example, keep their hands clean, and teach their subordinates to do the same. As a military man who spent many years with Israel's civilian decision makers, I knew how bad things had gotten in this regard, and I always saw it as my duty to keep the IDF from going down the same road.

Beyond the rule of law, I have seen a similar breakdown in democratic decision making—notably in the process that led to last summer's disengagement from Gaza. Few things can be of greater importance to the future of Israeli solidarity than maintaining the trust of the soldiers in their officers and the trust of the public in the IDF. Thus it was clear to me that the IDF had to carry out in the best possible way what was, in the end, a decision taken by the political echelon, while making clear to officers and soldiers the importance of adhering to the rule of law and to the rules of the democratic game. For more than a year, I prepared the IDF for this mission, one of the hardest ever imposed on me, and I am proud of the soldiers and the officers for the way they carried it out despite what was clearly a flawed decision-making process on the political level. In so complex a reality, IDF officers must maintain their professional integrity and remember that in a democracy, they are responsible to policies, not politicians.

The tendency to delegitimize the "other" in Israeli society is potentially catastrophic as well, both with regard to the external "other," and to the "other" within. Against an enemy, soldiers must be prepared to fight because of a duty to defend rather than hatred for the enemy. As for the internal "other," during my military service I met Israelis of all walks of life, and I came to understand the depth of the societal rifts that undermine the cohesiveness of the country. Mandatory military service is an opportunity to bring together people from different communities. This is part of what it means to be a "people's army."

In the last few years, the IDF's status as a people's army has been called into question, with proposals to transform it into a regular professional force. This debate, as I see it, is premature, because the IDF will have to continue to maintain its present size, more or less, for the foreseeable future. It is true that, over the last three years, I myself took the lead in reducing the size of the regular and reserve armies, a process that was made possible as the result of changes in the threat and especially in the wake of new technologies and capabilities. However, Israel is simply unable to finance a professional regular army of the required size. So it will have to continue relying on the existing combination: A relatively small regular army based on what conscription can yield, and a reserve system large enough to make up the difference. Only when our strategic threat level drops significantly, or when the country's population grows substantially, will it be possible to discuss doing away with the "people's army."

Let me conclude by saying that today, Israel's strategic position is much stronger than it has been in the past, but the challenges of the future are great. The central one, as I have suggested, is to persuade hostile neighbors to recognize Israel, and to reconcile themselves to its right to exist as an independent Jewish state.

This is connected to the second major challenge: To internalize the advantages of a Western “society of plenty” without losing Jewish patriotism and identity, and without weakening the Zionist ethos. This, in my opinion, is more worrisome than the external threat: Within Israel and without, the fundamental question of the legitimacy of an independent Jewish state is being questioned, and not only on the fringes.

My mother survived the Holocaust. My father came to Palestine in 1925 from the Ukraine as a fifteen-year-old after one of his brothers had been murdered because he was a Jew, and another brother had been arrested because of his Zionist activity. My grandmother comes from a family that came to Safed after escaping the Spanish Inquisition, and has remained there ever since. To me it is clear that in a world divided into nations and countries, there must be at least one Jewish state, or else we will endure continuous persecution. With all the disagreement and confusion and mistakes, everything comes down to this one irreducible fact: We have no choice but to prevail.

In one of his last poems, Natan Alterman wrote:

Then the devil said: This besieged one— How shall I defeat him? He has courage and skill to act He has weapons and wisdom on his side. And he said: I will not take away his strength Neither bridle nor bit will I put on him Nor will I make him fainthearted Nor will I weaken his hand as in days of old. Only this shall I do: I shall dull his mind, And he will forget that his cause is just. Thus said the devil, And the heavens paled with fear As they watched him rise To carry out his plan.

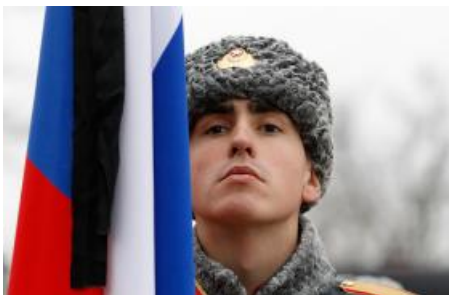
As a commander, I have seen the next generation of Israelis before they enlist, during their regular military service, and later in the reserves and I can testify that this generation is prepared for any challenge. In many ways this generation is superior to my own, just as I am convinced that my generation was superior to that of my parents. From the point of view of the quality of human resources, the State of Israel has people it can rely on. But without a national consensus as to the country’s aims and justification, military might is of little use. Our enemies draw encouragement from Israeli self-doubt. The greatest challenge facing the State of Israel, therefore, is to restore to Israeli society its faith in the righteousness of its path.

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