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Just Wars?

Israeli Society through the War Lens

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Since the birth of Zionism in the 19th century, and from the moment this ideology first took effect, Israel has been at war. War is an all-consuming experience for any society, and it is what shapes our identity as Israelis. War is the lens through which we see the world, and through which we frame our past and present realities. War is the measure by which leaders are elected, children raised, and national priorities decided.

Security & Defense

The constant state of war also drives the most painful conflicts within Israeli society. Pressing questions such as what is morally acceptable in war, who bears the burden of fighting, how various parts of society should conduct themselves in wartime, and what are the economic repercussions of war are topmost in the national debate. That is why to understand Israel from the outside, one must look at reality through our eyes. First, it is important to understand that Israeli discourse does not make the crucial distinction between security and defense. Unlike other countries, which mostly have a Ministry of Defense to deal with international threats, Israel has a Ministry of Security (Misrad HaBitahon in Hebrew).

Defense is something that can be measured. You can check yourself against your goals every day. You can outline plans for defending against specific threats. You can create a system for dealing with such threats and test its success. Security, on the other hand, is an abstract notion. It is tied to the anxieties formed by individual and collective experiences, in Israel's case throughout Jewish history. An allegory may illustrate this point. Tradition tells of a Jewish town in 17th-century Europe that was ravaged by a pogrom. As the assailants swept through the town, an elderly Jewish man stood at the doorway to his empty store, inviting passersby to come in and make a purchase. When asked what he was selling, he replied: "Security".[1] Indeed, the Yiddish word for security (bitokhen) also means faith.

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To understand the political views of Israelis, it is necessary to consider the history of Jews throughout the past centuries. The past is very much present and still shapes our worldview. Hundreds of years of persecution, the Holocaust, and the wars and acts of

terrorism that have plagued the Zionist project from the outset, have all shaped Israelis' current sense of security. Israel is one of the most fortified countries in the world, by objective standards – a scientific, technological and military titan. Yet its citizens never feel safe. That is because our worldview is not shaped by how strong our defenses are, but by how unsafe we feel. This insight is crucial to understanding the gap between how Israelis see their wars and how the rest of the world perceives them.

The Just War

Israel's history reveals that we have been fighting two separate wars. The first war relates to the establishment and defense of a Jewish and democratic state within the pre-1967 borders and in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. It is a war against countries and terrorist groups that do not recognize the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in their nation-state. This is a just war according to the principles of international law and the standards of the international community. The right of the Jewish people to self-determination has been internationally recognized – in the 1947 Partition Plan and later in UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, issued after the 1967 and 1973 wars, respectively.

The Unjust War

Yet Israel is also fighting a second war. This one is aimed at expanding Israel's eastern border until the Jordan River by means of settlements facilitated by military occupation. This war is fought beyond Israel's national borders and violates the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, which the world has also recognized in various UN and Security Council resolutions. That is why it is an unjust war.

The truth is that the first war is over. Israel won. The Arab world has accepted Israel's existence in the Middle East, thanks to a series of military victories and several diplomatic measures: the peace treaty with Egypt; the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence, which recognized Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state within 1967 borders (based on UN Resolution 181 and UNSC Resolution 242, which are included in the declaration); and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. After decades of fighting, Israel has triumphed. The member states of the Arab League have abandoned their traditional rejection of Israel's existence. [2] In a decision announced in Beirut in March 2002, they declared themselves willing to establish diplomatic ties with Israel and define the conflict over, contingent on the fulfillment of said international resolutions.

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Since its existence is an established fact, Israel is now only fighting the second, unjust war. Trying to expand the eastern border at the expense of national security and democratic principles is undermining the legitimacy that the world originally accorded Israel – a legitimacy reinforced during the first war, which Israel fought for its independence.

Yet look through the Israeli lens, and you will see only one war: the ongoing fight for the existence of the Jewish people in their homeland, against enemies who deny their right to self-determination. The image of Jewish-Israelis as "a small nation surrounded by enemies" or a "villa in the jungle" is proliferated by politicians across the board. All Israelis see is a justified war of defense. That is because our lens is colored by a history of persecution, extermination, and distrust of the international community.

The common wisdom that "when push comes to shove, no one will have our back" lies at the heart of Israel's philosophy of security. This is not surprising, given the violent clash of civilizations playing out in the Middle East as Samuel Huntington predicted. Forty years of fighting between superpowers, countries, organizations and tribes have seen some two million people killed and more than eight million displaced.

Notwithstanding the common Israeli view, the second, unjust war, which Israel is fighting despite having won the first war, is not a war of self-defense fought against an existential threat. It is fought between Israel and the Palestinian people, who are struggling to achieve self-determination through organized and individual acts of terrorism. Being waged in the 21st century, this war, which has been shaped by the rise of digital social media, public opinion and globalization, is not fought on the battlefield and its transformative effects reach far beyond the numbers of casualties and physical damage on both sides. Possessing a central cognitive component, the second war does not bring forward an end to the conflict, but only encourages terrorism, undermines Israel's international status and threatens its identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

That is why the second war is different from the first one in its very essence; it cannot be won and its effects are detrimental to Israeli society; it is waged against the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks, a threat that in itself does not pose an imminent danger to the physical existence of the state; instead, it is the never-ending war on terror that poses an imminent threat to the country's democratic institutions and values. The fight against terrorism in the 21st century is different from historical wars between countries in its very essence. It cannot be decided on the battlefield. Even if we destroy the military wing of some terrorist group, a more extreme version is likely to take its place if the overarching political framework, in which these terrorist organizations are operating, will not have changed. In this war, occupying territory and controlling a civilian population for decades only begets more violence and terrorism. No one can pinpoint when it began and certainly cannot predict how and when it will end. The resilience of Israeli society will determine whether we win or lose it. This war is also dangerous for democracy, as it casts Palestinian citizens of Israel as a fifth column in the eyes of the Jewish majority, thereby broadening the rift between the two groups and undermining the principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Allowing the second war to continue tearing away Israel's democratic foundations.

Consequences for Israeli Society

Our political response to this constant threat of terror has created a "double fear effect". By succumbing to our fear of terrorists, we are letting them win. In this atmosphere, the public prefers security to human and civil rights and the courts are quick to deny the rights of individuals and minorities seen as a potential enemy. Political leaders and candidates use fearmongering to get elected, and then find themselves adopting increasingly extreme positions to curry favor with an ever more violent and fearful populace.

The second war is tearing Israel apart.[3] Most Jewish Israelis believe that a Jewish and democratic state strikes the right balance between a national home for Jews and protecting the rights of individuals and minorities. This majority understands that this vision of a national home can only be fulfilled through an agreement with the

Palestinians that will establish two states for two peoples. Such an agreement will enable the Jewish majority to define the character of Israel while protecting the equal rights of its Palestinian citizens. The conflict dividing Israeli society centers on partition and on the significance of withdrawing from most of the territories occupied in 1967. Opponents to the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank believe that this will threaten Israel's physical existence; supporters argue that not withdrawing will compromise Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state. The catch is that each side presents the other's program as an existential threat. At present, fear of terrorism is overcoming the fear of Israel losing its identity as a democratic state.

The debate over the future of the Occupied Territories is informed by almost three decades of failed attempts to reach a peace agreement, whereby Israelis and Palestinians differ in their narratives on this matter. The Israeli version, in brief, is that the negotiations began in order to restore security, in response to Palestinian violence in the First Intifada and international pressure after the First Gulf War. Yet the guiding principle of the talks – "land for security" – was proven wrong. Withdrawing from Palestinian cities in the West Bank and handing territory over to the Palestinian Authority was only rewarded with more terrorism and violence. Evacuating 8,000 settlers from Gaza and withdrawing to the international border did not stop rocket attacks.

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That is why, without going into the Palestinian perspective, security is the major issue that Israelis care about going forward. Any move that may jeopardize security will be rejected out of hand.

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Palestinians celebrate Israeli withdrawal from Gaza - *Source: AP Archive*

Future Agreement

A future agreement will therefore have to stress two important elements: First, it must provide a clear diplomatic vision for the outline of the agreement. The "constructive ambiguity" of postponing discussions about core issues to both sides is no longer possible. Second, the progress towards a negotiated solution will have to be incremental; the guiding principle of the Oslo Accords and of subsequent negotiations, according to which "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" with respect to the core issues, hindered progress and prevented trust-building with the Palestinians, allowing rejectionist minorities on either side to dictate a violent reality.

"To guarantee its future as a Jewish and democratic state, Israel must make the two-state solution its top security priority"

To guarantee its future as a Jewish and democratic state, Israel must make the two-state solution its top security priority. This means taking independent steps to advance an agreement even if the Palestinians are recalcitrant at first.[4] The four parts of such an initiative would be:

Announcing that Israel is willing to engage immediately in talks with any Palestinian leader who accepts the principle of 'two states for two peoples', based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and on the Arab peace initiative.[5] Israel would also call upon Arab leaders to join the initiative.

Announcing that Israel has no sovereign claims east of the Separation Barrier and will cease construction activities there. The idea is not to create a border unilaterally – the future border will be agreed in negotiations – but to signal to the Palestinians and to the international community that Israel is willing to reach an agreement and does not intend to hold on to any territories other than those agreed on in the land swap.

Legislating an 'Absorption, Compensation, and Voluntary Evacuation Law' for settlers living east of the barrier who will want to relocate to Israel. The future of those who elect to remain will be determined in the negotiations. Maintaining military presence in the West Bank in order to protect the remaining settlers and Palestinians, until proper security arrangements are in place as part of the final agreement.

By taking such an initiative, Israel will send several important messages. For Israelis, the message will be that the two states solution is a national interest and crucial to securing the country's future as a Jewish and democratic state. The mistake of the Gaza withdrawal, which created a vacuum that allowed terrorist organizations to take over, will not be repeated. If we do have to continue fighting, it will be a just war to safeguard the founding principles of the state.

The settlers will be framed as victorious. They answered their government's call to protect the vulnerable rear of the country, continuing the Zionist narrative of settlement as a means to achieving national security. They followed in the footsteps of the 'halutzim', the pioneers who settled in rural areas before the state was founded and effectively defined its borders. The settlers have achieved their goal, as they forced the Palestinians to come to terms with Israel's existence. Geopolitical reality has now changed and borders are no longer decided by settlement. As the Palestinians and neighboring countries now recognize the State of Israel, the settlements are no longer a security asset. That is why the settlers must triumphantly return home.

To the international community, the initiative will signal that Israel is acting in the spirit of international resolutions, and not through force. Our continued military presence in the Occupied Territories will be necessary until an agreement is reached guaranteeing the safety of Israelis.

The Palestinians will hear that the two-state solution is a shared interest. This is not a surrender to terrorism, but rather taking action to ensure that extremists on either side will not dictate the future of the region. Israel is calling for negotiations while taking independent action, without creating facts on the ground that would hamper an agreement. Should the Palestinians refuse to negotiate, while the international community backs Israel's initiative, that would undermine the legitimacy of the Palestinian position. This may lead to international recognition of the Separation Barrier as the border. The initiative will also send Palestinians the message that it is Israel, not they, who will determine the Jewish and democratic character of the state.

At this time, no one can honestly promise that an agreement will usher in an era of peace. The Middle East is a volatile region. Yet by taking the initiative, we will ensure that if our children do have to continue fighting, it will be a just war of defense to safeguard the future of Israel, in the spirit of its founding values.

Endnotes

[1] The tale appears in Sholem Asch, Kiddush HaShem (1926).

[2] This position was epitomized by the "Three No's" formulated in the Khartoum Summit after the Six-Day War, in August 1967: no peace, no recognition, no negotiation.

[3] For further reading, see Micah Goodman, Catch-67 (2018).

[4] The steps outlined here are based on the program proposed by Blue White Future, a non-partisan political initiative of which the writer is a co-founder.

[5] The updated Arab Peace Initiative includes agreed land swaps, which would allow most of the settlers to remain in the settlement blocs.

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Admiral (ret.) Ayalon is a former director of the I.S.A (the Shin Bet) and a former commander of Israel's Navy. Ayalon received the Medal of Valor, the highest Israeli military decoration for his participation in the Green Island Raid in 1969. He has served as a cabinet minister and a member of the Knesset. Along with Sari Nusseibeh, he has headed the 'People's Voice' peace initiative in 2002.

Currently Ayalon is the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy & Strategy. Ayalon is also one of the founders of 'Blue White Future', a non-partisan political movement, committed to securing the future of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state through facilitating an inclusive discourse to promote a two state solution.