

# Thoughts on Israel's Security on the Eve of Elections

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“What is the most important issue that the next government must deal with?” This question was recently posed in a public opinion poll conducted in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*. Forty-seven percent of respondents replied that the security of the State of Israel and the war on terrorism were the most important issues facing the next government. Judging by these results, the Israeli public is more level-headed than some of its leaders and self-appointed public opinion formers. These findings are also interesting from an electoral and political point of view, as they clearly indicate, contrary to some widespread theories, that most of the public instinctively senses the primary importance of the security issue—and that this may determine the way they will vote in the next elections.

The basic logic of the public's reasoning is easy to discern. As the survival of the State of Israel depends first and foremost on its security, if it were to be impaired, all other issues would, ipso facto, become irrelevant. Not that other concerns, such as education, the economic downturn, unacceptable socioeconomic gaps, or the plague of corruption do not have an impact on security. For most of the Israeli public, however, the common denominator of even those issues is security.

It is imperative to continually review and reexamine the factors that relate directly or indirectly to our national security. This article does not presume to offer a thorough study of Israel's security doctrines or to provide a detailed analysis of the IDF's modes of operation, level of training, etc. This is the task of the army's commanders, and one hopes that there is reason to be confident that the IDF has internalized the lessons of the Second Lebanon War.

We will not engage here in a debate about the important ideological, historical, legal or moral aspects of the “territories”—my emphasis being on the pragmatic security issues. These do not always receive the attention they deserve—either in the internal public debate in Israel, or in our political and diplomatic dealings with the international community. This is so, despite the fact that at least some of Israel’s foreign interlocutors claim to be receptive to considerations of security. Unfortunately, the fault lies not only with those who either purposely or ignorantly disregard vital Israeli interests, often fostering delusional peace options, but also with those who profess that as “our right to this land is inalienable; therefore, there is no need to engage in security or pragmatic strategic arguments.”

One of the first points to discuss in this context is the apparent contradiction in terms between “peace borders” and “secure or defensible borders.” In other words, would peace agreements between Israel and its neighbors be a sufficient guarantee for our security, or is it the other way round, i.e., that safeguarding our security is a fundamental precondition not only for enabling us to make peace possible, but also for its durability once achieved? The difference between the two terms is evident: while the stability of the “peace border” largely depends on the desire and ability of the other side to maintain it, the “secure or defensible border” is to a major extent a function of our own will and determination, and of course of our ability to maintain it—militarily, politically, economically and diplomatically. Also, lest we forget, we are not located in Western Europe, but in the volatile Middle East, an area populated by large numbers of people professing their belief in extremist and murderous ideologies and methods.

Stable and sustainable peace agreements are dependent on common interests and values. The Israeli peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt are indeed based on shared interests (at least from the point of view of their current leaders), including combating terrorism. Therefore, they have withstood the test of time, including two wars in Lebanon and two intifadas. However, one cannot take for granted that the aforementioned agreements, or similar ones with other Arab countries in the future, will always be immune to the assaults to which they will be subject, especially if regime changes should occur in some of them. Indeed, in the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan that were either concluded (or mostly negotiated) by Likud-led governments, the overriding principle of secure borders was maintained—with Egypt in Sinai and with Jordan in the Jordan Valley. Also, preliminary contacts with Syria, during Benjamin Netanyahu’s term as prime minister, were based on keeping part of the strategic and geographic advantages in the hands of Israel, unlike the steps apparently considered by other Israeli governments. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in addition to their acting as a barrier to the possible renewal of the pre-1967 direct military and terrorist threat to the Galilee and the Hula Valley from a Syrian-held Golan, the

Golan Heights also serve as an important line of defense in other respects. Even if the Golan Heights were to be demilitarized, the absence of an Israeli military and intelligence presence, especially on Mount Hermon, would transform the region into a corridor and possible staging area for aggression against Israel from a potential eastern front.

First, however, one must relate to a “front” even closer to home, both with regard to its geographical aspects and to the time element. Outgoing Prime Minister Olmert has said, referring to the Annapolis process, that the issue of borders was the “easiest one” to solve. This was confirmed by Abu Mazen’s statement that on that issue, “we are closer than on any other subject.” The Kadima leader Tzipi Livni shares that view. The fact, however, is that borders may actually pose the toughest problem to Israel’s security—unless one disregards one of the fundamental components of Israel’s physical security. The equation regarding the Palestinians is different from the one with Egypt or even Syria. In this case, not only do we have two national movements historically fighting over the same piece of land, but there is also a practical problem—neither the physical nor the demographic configuration of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River make it possible to draw a clear-cut and precisely defined line of separation between the two entities.

In other words, even if at some time in the future a Palestinian entity will come to exist in parts of the country, not only will a considerable number of Palestinian Arabs continue to live within the borders of the State of Israel, but Israel’s minimal defense lines and its vitally important strategic depth, both in terms of geography and topography, would criss-cross the territory to be controlled by the Palestinians.

In mentioning the synergy and/or contradiction between shared interests and shared values, it should be mentioned that even if one envisions shared interests with the Palestinians with regard to the economy, tourism, ecology, water, resources, etc., and these do exist, in view of the fundamentalist ideology of Hamas and the irredentist tendencies of major elements of the PLO, the prospect of shared values looks extremely elusive.

The very fact that no Palestinian party is willing to discuss a genuine territorial compromise indicates the deep abyss between their concept of peace and ours. Even so-called “moderates” such as Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) declared (in an interview with the *New York Times Magazine*) that he would not stray from “Yasir Arafat’s ideas and principles,” including the so-called “right of return” of Arab refugees. These basic and fundamental facts were, in the past, generally taken into consideration not only by all Israeli governments, but also by large parts

of the international community, which has dealt with the border issue since 1967: President Reagan stated explicitly that "Israel should never be asked to go back to where it was only eight miles wide;" the formulators of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the majority in the council linked the Israeli withdrawal from "territories" (not "the territories") that it had seized after defeating Arab aggression in 1967 with security considerations. A letter from President Ford about the Golan Heights, as well as a letter from President George W. Bush to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, dated April 14, 2004, confirmed this link. In the letter to Sharon, Bush said Israel "must have secure and recognized borders..." (This was not part of the original draft, which referred only to "demographic" changes. The final text was changed partly as a result of the efforts of this writer in persuading Sharon that the wording should be adapted to include the security aspect.) The references to secure borders in these letters, as well as in public statements, thus unequivocally confirmed that, from the point of view of both demography and security, Israel should not have to withdraw to the pre-1967 "Green Line." That line was never intended to be the country's border, even according to the Arab signatories to the ceasefire after Israel's war of independence.

The Wye agreements of October 1998 also addressed the security issue. Even the road map of the international Quartet, despite its many shortcomings, left the subject of the borders open. But more than anywhere else, these principles were clearly central to the Camp David agreement of 1978. The reference there to "specified security locations" clearly relates to the strategic areas in Judea and Samaria in which there would still be an Israeli presence even after the establishment of the then-planned Palestinian autonomy.

Furthermore, as Moshe Dayan, the foreign minister in Begin's government and conceivably the main architect of the agreement, emphasized, not just a military presence but a civilian presence as well, or in other words, civilian "settlements" should exist beyond the Green Line. As he explained at the time, "An army without a civilian infrastructure in the territories will, in the long run, be considered an army of occupation and will have to leave." The "settlements" in Judea and Samaria, or at least some of them, are consequently not a military burden to the state as some claim, but an important cornerstone of our ability to cope with potential aggression, including planned terrorist acts. (The debate that raged at that time between the proponents of holding on to the "mountain ridge" and those who advocated positions on either the eastern or western "slopes" will not be discussed here. In fact, these were mainly differences of degree or detail with regard to a basic imperative accepted by both sides.) From this aspect, the Jordan Valley plays an especially important role (and, some would claim, for Jordan, too), as it serves as a natural barrier to an enemy's military penetration and to terrorist infiltration from the east, as well as to irredentist Palestinian expansion eastwards.

In fact, one could consider the possibility of a Jordanian security role in other parts of the “territories” as well. In this context, one must give thought to the situation now unfolding in Iraq. If, after the First Gulf War—but especially at the start of the Second Gulf War—there were “experts” who claimed that the danger from an “eastern front” had vanished, the potential transformation of Iraq into an Iranian interest zone would prove the contrary.

And what about Ariel Sharon’s “security fence”? His statement at the Herzliya Conference in 2004 that the fence wouldn’t be a “political border” can be interpreted, of course, in different ways. Did he mean that the future political border would run west of the fence, more or less following the so-called Green Line, or did he perhaps intend to suggest that the border could also deviate eastwards? We shall never know.

In any case, although one of the basic principles of Sharon’s approach was that concentrations of Jewish population should not be left outside the large Jewish settlement blocs (and he may have considered creating additional blocs), he did not touch upon the question of whether this would also require moving some of the Palestinians living west of the future border from their current locations, such as those residing, for instance, adjacent to Ariel. In any case, if Prime Minister Olmert and some of his political allies really believed that the question of the borders was the “easiest” to solve, there is no escaping the conclusion that they were disregarding some of the most fundamental territorial aspects of the security of the State of Israel—especially at a time when it is increasingly clear, at least according to Israeli intelligence, that an Israeli withdrawal from most of the “West Bank” means its handover to Hamas and to its Iranian patrons.

There are, of course, those who would claim that in modern warfare, especially in the missile era, the terms “secure” or “defensible” borders, or indeed the very concept of physical obstacles of any kind, have become obsolete. To some extent this is true, especially in the case of long-range ballistic missiles and rockets, military satellites, armed drones, and so on. However, there are also counter-arguments. Modern warfare does not only mean missiles, but also, increasingly, confrontation with guerilla and terrorist forces (such as Hizbullah and Hamas, the terrorists that the American army faces in Iraq, the Chechnyan rebels, and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan), making the territorial aspect alongside the intelligence aspect more important than ever. (It should be noted that if Israel were to relinquish its military presence in Judea and Samaria, it would also lose many of its present intelligence sources.) It is especially in this missile era, and in a tiny country such as Israel, that the possibility of a strategic missile attack on population centers could lead to civilians fleeing en masse and to a major disruption of its ability to call up its reserves. To quote Prof. Fuad Adjami: “The military

performance of Hizbullah, it should be apparent by now, is not a performance of a militia, nor are unmanned drones and missiles of long range the weapons of boys of the alleyways.” To be sure, “defensible borders,” even the most ideal ones, cannot or should not be a substitute for maximum military strength, for maintaining our qualitative edge in all fields, or for proactive defense and various preventive or preemptive measures. Furthermore, most Israelis realize that we can never rely on international bodies for our security, not only in view of our own less than positive experience with various UN forces, but also in light of the recent Russian–Georgian crisis, which has also demonstrated something about the efficiency of international organizations in handling military conflicts. The distressing failure (although mostly for political and not military reasons) to adequately defend Sderot, Ashkelon and the western Negev from missile and mortar attacks is proof that the effective defense of the State of Israel and its civilians will continue to require an integrated approach using the various means available—with security areas and defensible borders being among the more important of those.

However, we cannot afford to overlook the fact that the nature of warfare is changing. Contemporary wars are like a crossword puzzle—a continuous grid of intertwining disputes and conflicts. The goals or results of such wars are not necessarily the achievement of permanent arrangements or peace agreements. As the American professor and legal expert Philip Bobbitt, a member of President Clinton’s National Security Council, explains in his important new book, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-first Century*, terrorist organizations today imitate the methods of global economic concerns by establishing local, partially autonomous branches scattered around the world. In his opinion, it is only a matter of time before these terrorist groups lay their hands on nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction. A similar assessment was recently made by the American intelligence community. Therefore, he calls upon the democratic world, especially the US and Europe, not to delay and to use all modern means available to confront this new threat. This new terrorism does not require public support or sympathy; consequently, it does not limit itself as to the form and magnitude of the violence that it employs. The methods advocated by Prof. Bobbitt include proactive preventive actions against terrorist organizations and sophisticated means to protect the civilian population—a subject that was neglected by Israel during the Second Lebanon War and in the current conflict with Hamas. One of Prof. Bobbitt’s conclusions is that modern warfare is no longer about “a civilian population at the rear”—a country’s entire territory is considered the front. (This reality will require a new evaluation of the role and function of the IDF Home Front Command.) An additional point raised by Prof. Bobbitt, which of course is very important to Israel, is the irrelevance of many of the articles of the Geneva Convention where the war against the new terrorism is concerned. To a large

degree, Israel is already confronting this reality. The American secretary of defense, Robert M. Gates, has called this new form of warfare “irregular,” and the Second Lebanon War proved that Israel had not yet drawn the necessary conclusions from this situation. However, it should be emphasized once again that the importance of the territorial aspect of the security of countries is in no way invalidated by our lessons from the recent war, or by the words of Prof. Bobbitt, but is, in fact, *confirmed* by them.

This is not a commentary on the progress or failures in the so-called peace process. There will be those who claim that if Israel were to insist on all, or even part, of the positions mentioned here, any chances of reaching a written agreement with the official Palestinian leadership (i.e., Abu Mazen and company) — or with the present Syrian leadership — would vanish. They are right. But from Israel’s point of view, the existential question is not the availability of this or that document “until the end of President Bush’s term.” Rather, the question is whether, given the official Palestinian leadership’s impotence and Hamas’s dominance in the Gaza Strip and its potential dominance in the West Bank as well — and the role played by Iran (both in connection with Hamas in Palestine and with Syria and Hizbullah in the north and in the Middle East in general) — obtaining a document of this sort is really an aim that Israel should put before its basic security considerations.

Genuine peace such as that which prevails in Western Europe or North America is probably not in the offing, and will not be for a long time. That does not mean, however, that Israel and the international community should not make a major effort to create a more favorable climate for reaching an eventual political settlement in the future. As Jackson Diehl put it in a recent article in the *Washington Post*, the next American administration should focus on building “a foundation for peace from the ground up, rather than pushing fickle and fragile leaders to dictate a settlement from above. The timeline for success would be measured in years, not months. The goal would not be a document that either Netanyahu or even Livni and Abbas could sign but the construction of a healthy and vibrant Palestinian society — that is, independent media, courts, political parties and nongovernmental organizations that could stand behind a settlement with Israel.” And one could certainly add to the above: promoting a vibrant and functioning (and less corrupt) Palestinian economy. In fact, whether coincidentally or not, this seems to be the approach of the Quartet’s Tony Blair, as well that of Likud leader Netanyahu in his plan for an “economic peace.” There are signs, though fewer than we would like, that some Palestinians, especially business people, have come to share this view.

As for Syria, only the very sanguine or naïve can be confident that in return for the Golan Heights, Damascus would relinquish its quest for dominance in

Lebanon (in fact, there are increasing indications to the contrary), sever its all-important ties with Iran and Hizbullah and abandon its profound and enduring enmity toward the Jewish state.

That being said, it is clear that in the present situation, the worst threat to Israel's security, and to its very existence, is the advanced Iranian effort to develop nuclear weapons. Israel has the means to protect itself, up to a point, against this threat, although considering its global nature, it would be preferable if the measures taken against Iran were of a multinational character. What this may mean in concrete terms, namely the question of if or when the West (i.e., NATO), led by the US, would take military action against Iran, goes beyond the parameters of this article. No doubt this subject—as well as the possibility of Israel independently taking action (though this, too, must probably depend on some measure of cooperation with the US)—must perforce be at the very top of the agenda of Israeli policy makers in the coming months. The margin for error with regard to whatever course of action is chosen is practically nonexistent.

Realistically, and from the point of view of the responsibilities involved, reaching decisions will be difficult—especially considering the popular and political limitations of a narrowly based government. It is noteworthy that a 2008 survey conducted for the Herzliya Conference demonstrated that 86 percent of Israeli Jews were not intimidated by the Iranian threat and did not even consider an Iranian bomb a reason for leaving the country. In this context, Israel's strategic ties with the US remain, as they will in the future, an important element of its security, and an effort must be made by future Israeli governments to upgrade them. Despite the view of some, who claim that the days of the US as the leading superpower are over, none of the other great powers—Europe, China, India or Russia—will take America's dominant place in coming decades, certainly not in our region.

An additional aspect of our ability to withstand security threats is related to the overall national fortitude of the people of Israel. Education, and particularly that meant to encourage ways and means of service in the military, is a central point in this context. This is not a simple task in the current public climate, but the educational system, at all its levels, must restore the Israeli people's pride in the IDF and in military service. David Ben-Gurion was certainly no "militarist" and the restoration of the IDF's prestige has nothing to do with "militarism," but it is a vital condition for the very survival and existence of Israel. Maybe it was to this point that in 1936, the first bloody year of what was then called the "Arab Rebellion," Moshe Beilinson, the editor of the Labor paper *Davar*, was referring when he wrote: "Until when, they ask, until when? The answer to that timeless question is: until the strength of the Jewish people in its land brings about in

advance the defeat of any enemy attack.” Both the question and the answer still reverberate today, and, as if to complement that answer, it is worth remembering the words of Moshe Dayan. In 1969, he told the graduates of the IDF Staff College: “It seems to me that now, as in the past, the answer to the question ‘What will be?’ must focus on our ability to withstand difficulties and on our ability to cope with them—more than on the expectation of finite and definite solutions to our problems. We must prepare ourselves physically and mentally for the long struggle; that is more important than determining a timetable for the achievement of rest and sanctuary.” He continued: “The Jewish people is endowed with two qualities that enable us to confront the interminable struggle. One is faith. The second is ‘Do not fear’ (my servant Jacob). These are the basis and the condition for the ability to meet and face any struggle, so that ‘we can face anything’—in every generation and in changing situations.”

All of the above serve to remind us that a nation’s security is unshakably tied to such matters as leadership and the ability to correctly analyze present and future threats and/or opportunities—attributes that were sadly, even tragically, lacking in Israel’s outgoing government and will hopefully be restored in the future.

### **Postscript, January 2009**

This article was written several months before “Operation Cast Lead.” However, it seems that not a few of the points raised in it were confirmed and underscored by events. Though in most respects the operation was a war—it certainly fits the term “irregular” war coined by U.S. Defense Secretary Gates as quoted in the article. The article also rightly mentioned the obsolescence of military front lines in the sense that this term is usually used. Especially pertinent in view of Hamas’s modus operandi was the article’s reference to the fact that “the new terrorism... does not limit itself to the form and magnitude of the violence that it employs”—but on the other hand, it did not fully foresee that Hamas would succeed in garnering public sympathy by skillfully and cynically exploiting the humanitarian suffering caused by the war and its own use of civilians as human shields. That the territorial aspect of Israel’s security is as relevant as before was proven, among other things, by the issue of the “Philadelphi corridor” and by Israel’s insistence on a “security zone” along the Gaza Strip’s border. Also, I believe a cogent point—and not only with regards to Gaza, but also to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a whole—was the comment that “the goals of such wars (i.e., wars against terrorist organizations) are not necessarily the achievement of permanent arrangements or peace agreements.”