

Alternative Perceptions of Security and Vulnerability amongst the Israeli Population

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Introduction:

Societies and nations do not always share the same internal discourses of security and vulnerability, even when they perceive their national *raison d'etre* in similar terms. The means and agencies through which national security is achieved can be contested by diverse and, in some cases, opposed understandings of what constitutes national strength.

This paper sets out the two contrasting discourses of security and vulnerability as understood by Israel's population. This, in turn, is reflected in the hotly contested political discourse which takes place within Israel and which has traditionally been categorized as the binary positions of the "left" (strength through peace) and the "right" (strength through territory). This simplistic binary position has been modified during the past decade as the notion of a "two state solution" to the Israel-Palestine conflict, traditionally a discourse of the left, has become the centrist consensus discourse of Israeli society and, most recently, been partially implemented by a right wing government with the unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of the Jewish / Israeli settlements in this region (at this very moment).

The Parameters and Agencies of National Security and Vulnerability

In order to better understand the changing nature of these two traditional discourses of security and vulnerability, it is important to understand the key agencies through which such security is achieved. We focus here on three key agencies – the respective roles of military, territory and demography.

1. Military Deterrence

Israel is today the major military power in the Middle East. The last significant military threat to the existence of the State occurred during the Yom Kippur – October 1973 War. Following the subsequent (1978-1979) peace agreement with Egypt, the most powerful military threat to the existence of the State was removed. During the past decade, the military power of Syria has also declined significantly. In terms of conventional warfare, Israel retains a significant advantage over all of its neighbours, with expenditure on defence continuing to take up the largest single portion of the country's budget. This is strengthened even further by the military industries and the defence related aid and assistance received from the United States. There is a broad consensus amongst Israel's Jewish population that even under conditions of conflict resolution, Israel must continue to maintain its military superiority and that this is the only guarantee for any future peace agreements to hold up, given the total lack of trust amongst the country's political and military leaders for the Arab states, even after appending their signatures to, and implementing the conditions, of respective peace agreements.

Israel also retains a significant non conventional nuclear deterrent. Although Israel refuses to acknowledge the existence of this deterrent, it has become common knowledge. The official position of successive Israeli governments is that "Israel will not be the first to introduce non conventional weapons into warfare in the region" but, given the holocaust syndrome which underlies much of the country's securitization discourse, this is perceived as constituting the last resort to ensure the continued existence of the State in a time of extreme threat and crisis.

Possessing the strongest and technologically superior military apparatus does not ensure that the country is able to resolve all of its security problems, especially as it relates to violence and terror. The Intifadas of the late 1980's and the early 1000's has demonstrated that even the strongest military force is unable to prevent a popular uprising from taking place. Forces trained to combat neighbouring armies are unable to deal with thousands of civilians who protest their lack of independence and autonomy and it has been this, more than any threat emanating from external sources, which has resulted in the willingness of Israeli governments (even right wing

irredentist governments) to favour the two state solution to the conflict and eventual withdrawal from the Occupied Territories.

2. Territorial Buffers

Territory plays an important role in this constructed perception of both threat and security. Controlling key locations provides security, while the control of these same locations by the “other” creates threat. But the role of territory, especially micro-territories, in providing security, has changed in recent years. Warfare technology has brought into question the need for countries to retain control of defensible boundaries, strategic elevations and/or buffer zones. It has recently been argued that the significance of territory for national security has changed in response to processes of globalization and that the influence of traditional geographic organization of the world political map through national boundaries and, by definition, the need to defend these boundaries, is diminishing.

In Israel, the nature of the Israeli security discourse has been closely tied to the perceived existential threat facing the State from its Arab neighbours, the need to maintain both a strong military deterrent and to retain control of territories which provide the State with a security/strategic advantage. Despite the events of the past two decades, including peace agreements with both Egypt and Jordan, as well as the beginnings of process of conflict resolution with the Palestinians, the nature of the security discourse has not changed substantially. Territory remains an essential component of the continued social construction of the security threat.

In a detailed analysis of the territorial dimension of the security threat, I have previously analysed eight components of the territorial characteristics of the security discourse: a) territorial size; b) strategic territories; c) defensible borders; d) buffer zones; e) strategic corridors; g) micro security landscapes; g) settlement landscapes of control; and h) water security

The social construction of existential threat facing the collective, which has been part of the Israeli political/security discourse since the establishment of the State, derives partly from the small physical size of the territory. The country covers no more than 20,000 sq. kilometers in its pre-1967 boundaries, while this only increases to 25,000 sq. kilometers with the Occupied Territories in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. The notion that the country can be overrun, or cut into two, by an invading army within hours, is an important part of this

discourse. Students are constantly reminded that the United Nations partition proposals of 1947 would, if accepted by the Arab side, have resulted in the creation of an even smaller state than that which actually came into being after the War of Independence. Even with the Occupied Territories, the notion that the entire breadth of Israel and the West Bank is, at its widest, no more than 75 kilometers, shocks most observers who compare this geographical situation with the metropolitan areas within which they reside and which, in many cases, extends over a larger municipal territory. This objective reality, sub-consciously, justifies the right of the State to demand territory for the sake of security, given the perceived threat which faces its very existence.

Traditional security discourse is closely related to notions of military geography. A basic component of this discourse holds that it is important for armies to retain control of upland areas for strategic advantage. The topographical structure of Israel is such that key upland areas, notably the West Bank and the Golan Heights, were controlled by Jordan and Syria respectively prior to 1967. The proximity of these two regions to major Israeli population centers made their strategic significance all the greater. The Golan heights in particular is seen as constituting a major strategic imperative, threatening the safety and security of Israeli settlements for as long as they were under Syrian control. While opinions concerning the future of the West Bank are based on a combination of both strategic and religious/historical arguments, the Golan Heights is only perceived as a security issue.

There are two security dimensions concerning the West Bank territory: the western slopes overlooking the Israeli metropolitan center, and the Jordan valley in the east. The western slopes of the upland region overlook the major metropolitan center in the Israeli coastal Plain. Prior to 1967 this region was under Jordanian control and was considered to be of significant strategic threat to Israel in the case of a future war. Even under the conditions of conflict resolution, Israel has argued its right to retain an area of the West Bank in the western margins of the region, because of the geographic coincidence of Israeli concerns over Jewish settlements, water rights and the control of strategic areas.

The eastern margins of the West Bank also retain security significance. Immediately after the 1967 war, it was decided that Israel must retain direct control of the Jordan Valley as a means of ensuring that no foreign army would move into the area immediately bordering the Israeli population centres. This was the underlying concept behind the government policy of the time, known as the “Allon Plan”, aimed at ensuring what was termed as “defensible boundaries”.

Modern warfare technologies have meant that the strategic role of territories has changed significantly. The events of the Gulf War in the early 1990's had a profound effect on the thinking of senior policy makers and defense strategists. The introduction of ballistic missiles has brought the boundary into the heart of the Israeli cities. Having spent forty years providing an effective defense along the physical borders of the country, these were found to be ineffective in the face of the onslaught of missiles launched hundreds of miles away in Iraq. Not only did these missiles overfly the land boundaries, but they caused damage and injury in the metropolitan center of the country, the one area which had traditionally been perceived as distant from the conflict zone by the country's residents. This resulted in the subsequent creation of a new army command - the "oref" or hinterland command as a means of dealing with the new security threats facing the population centers during a potential future conflagration. Prior to this, the army commands were focused exclusively on the border regions and frontier zones.

3. Demographic Majorities

The struggle for demographic hegemony is as much part of the security discourse as is the fight to control territory. Groups feel justified in claiming sovereignty over a region when they represent the majority population group or when they can prove that they have been present in a given territory for the longest period of time and/or can trace their roots back to the earliest period of settlement. States may intervene in the planning process as a means of changing demographic ratios or in strengthening those symbols and myths which attest to the stronger claims of their group as contrasted with the claims of the "other". The use of "people" in this sense is highly instrumental in that their very existence takes on a political role. The State determines whether there are "too many" or "too few", and whether they live in those locations which best suit the political claims of the State.

The Arab-Jewish ratio within the territory controlled by Israel has always been of major significance in justifying claims to sovereignty. These ratios have changed through time and space. Jewish immigration to pre-State Palestine and post-State Israel have contrasted with the outflow of Palestinian refugees, creating Jewish demographic superiority within the boundaries of the State of Israel. While natural

growth rates tend to favor the more rapid growth of the Arab-Palestinian population, short-term hiccups occur as a result of sudden mass Jewish immigration, as occurred in the years following the establishment of the State, after the Six Day War of 1967 and with the mass immigration from the former Soviet republics in the early 1990's.

The influx of Jewish immigrants and the outflow of Palestinian refugees have created a sense of security for the one, while removing the sense of security for the other. The historical discussion concerning the reasons for the Palestinian refugee exodus, promoted by the local Arab-Palestinian leaders or forced upon the population by the Israeli army, has provoked heated political and academic debate amongst both Israeli and Palestinian historiographer. Whatever the reason, and it would be fair to assume that both factors played a role, approximately 600-700,000 Palestinians left their villages and were transformed into refugees, while many of them became second time refugees in 1967 following the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Jewish-Arab demographic ratios are considered part of the ongoing political struggle for national hegemony. The State implements policies aimed at bolstering the Jewish presence in certain regions and, at the same time, preventing spontaneous expansion of Arab communities through stringent zoning and planning legislation. Settlement policy, past and present, is aimed at creating a physical Jewish presence in regions of conflict, enhancing territorial control and contributing to demographic parity, and even majority. Population policies, as such, are seen by both sides as a central part of the security debate, one in which the security of one side (Israel) is enhanced, while the security of the other (Arabs - Palestinians) is weakened.

Contested Discourses of Security and Vulnerability in Israel

Using the three parameters of the security discourse discussed in the last section, the paper now examines the two competing arguments concerning the long term security and vulnerability of Israel. These are diametrically opposed to each other, but are similar in the sense that their respective proponents see them as constituting life and death – existential – issues for the State in the long term. Proponents of a Greater

Israel and the retention of the Occupied Territories believe that only through maximal territorial strength can Israel survive in the long term, while proponents of territorial withdrawal and the evacuation of settlements believe that only through a negotiated political solution can Israel retain its Jewish demographic majority and continue to exist as a Jewish State. Proponents of both security positions believe that it is essential for Israel to retain its qualitative military superiority, even after the implementation of formal peace agreements.

1. Strength through Territory

The strength through territory argument is posited by the right wing in Israel, and is spearheaded through the West Bank settler movement. While the latter, especially the Gush Emunim movement, believe that the Occupied Territories belong to Israel by Divine Right, this theological-political argument does not constitute the major argument for the retention of territories. Rather, it is the security argument, positing the need for territorial retention because of the strategic importance of these territories, the need to create what have been coined as "defensible boundaries", and the control of the upland areas overlooking the major Israeli metropolitan centres, which attract wider support than does the religious argument alone. The mainstream right wing party of government, the Likud party, is a secular party which has, during the past thirty years, created a coalition with the right wing religious nationalist and settler movements in a common cause to prevent territorial withdrawal from these regions. It is only, in recent years, the understanding even amongst many mainstream right wing politicians, not least Prime Minister Sharon who, in the past, has been one of the major proponents and builders of West Bank settlements, that it is the demographic future of the State of Israel which is in danger, which has resulted in the government decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and to evacuate all the Israeli settlements therein.

The fact that terrorist and suicide attacks on Israeli civilian targets have continued to take place in the post-Oslo period and have exacerbated since the onset of the second Intifada in 2000, has strengthened the security based opposition to territorial withdrawal. The argument that "there can be no withdrawal as long as terrorism continues" has been used as a powerful argument amongst those Israelis opposed to

the Gaza Disengagement in attracting floating sympathizers to their cause. This argument is used as a means of persuading the Israeli populace that no amount of territorial withdrawal or peace agreements will bring an end to terrorism and violence and that, in effect, the unilateral withdrawal on the part of the Israeli government is no more than the "awarding of a prize terror". They further argue that withdrawal under these conditions will result in an exacerbation, rather than weakening, of attacks on Israeli civilian targets as the Palestinians will come to the conclusion that it has been the armed conflict which has resulted in Disengagement and that only more of the same will bring about further future territorial withdrawals.

Thus the "security through territory" argument is the traditional discourse of the right wing in Israel, although the Camp David Peace Agreements with Egypt and the unilateral Disengagement from Gaza, both of them implemented by right wing governments, has pushed this discourse from the mainstream right to the more extreme camp of the settler movement and the Land of Israel ideologists. The fact that support for the Gaza withdrawal has been sounded amongst many senior ex-military generals, turned politicians, has weakened the security element of the opposition, at the same time strengthening the ideological and religious based opposition. Notwithstanding, the opposition to Gaza disengagement was given a major boost only shortly before implementation when the Finance Minister (and former Prime Minister) Benjamin Netanyahu resigned from the government in protest at what he argued was a grave security risk for the State of Israel. In his resignation speech, he argued that this move would only serve to increase terror and the firing of katyusha rockets into Israel. In particular, Netanyahu opposed the Israeli decision to allow the Palestinians to construct their own independent port in the Gaza Strip, on the basis that this would enable the Palestinians to bring in weapons for the purpose of continuing their armed struggle against Israel.

2. Strength through Peace

The alternative security argument posits the idea that Israel's long term security can only be ensured through the withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and the establishment of a separate and independent Palestinian State alongside the State of Israel. There are two bases for this argument – military and demographic.

The military argument, posited by both civilian and military leaders, is that the country is unable to arrive at conflict resolution through continued occupation. While the country's military superiority is sufficient to deal with the neighbouring countries, no military is capable of long term control and administration of a civilian population, denied their political and self determination rights. The inability of the Israeli army to deal with the civilian uprisings during the two Intifadas was a clear indication of this. As the younger Palestinian generations become more educated and more politically frustrated, together with the growth of Islamic fundamentalist opposition to occupation (especially the Hamas), it is becoming more, rather than less, difficult to deal with the uprisings. Even the use of hard line military retaliation and the occasional roundup of Hamas and other Palestinian leaders, does not – in the long term – enable the exercise of control. The fact that the hard line policies imposed by the Israeli government after acts of terrorism and suicide bombers only serves to worsen the social and economic conditions of the Palestinians on the ground (usually through closures of the Occupied Territories and the denial of the rights of Palestinians to find employment inside Israel) only makes it more, rather than less, difficult for Israel to administer to the civilian population and to maintain a reasonable standard of living for the population residing in the Occupied Territories (for which Israel is responsible under the stipulations of the Geneva Conventions). The fact that many of Israel's military leaders, including those who have served as commanders of regions in the Occupied Territories, have also arrived at this conclusion has a significant impact upon the public securitization discourse within Israel.

The second argument concerns the demographic parameter. Israel defines itself, first and foremost, as Jewish State which must retain a clear Jewish majority as the essential *raison d'être* of the State's existence. Within the recognized sovereign borders of Israel, the Jewish – Arab ratio is approximately 80-20 in favour of the Jewish population and has remained that way (with slight movement to each side as a result of more rapid natural population growth amongst the Arab population, counterbalanced by waves of Jewish immigration, especially with the mass Russian immigration during the 1990's) since the establishment of the State in 1948. This Jewish – Arab demographic ratio changes dramatically when taking the Occupied Territories into account. In 2005, this ratio was approximately 65-35 in favour of the

Jewish population, with the rapid population growth amongst the Palestinian population closing the gap continually. The existence of the Jewish settler population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (approximately 250,000 in 2005, excluding east Jerusalem) is less than ten percent of the population of these regions and has no significant demographic impact whatsoever.

Surveys of the Israeli population show that the single factor which most threatens the Jewish inhabitants of the country is the fear that Israel will lose its Jewish majority. For this reason, the majority of Israelis (both right and left wing) are opposed to the notion of Palestinian refugee repatriation as part of any future peace agreement. They also view the continued retention of the Occupied Territories as constituting a demographic threat to the continued existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state, and this is particularly the case in the Gaza Strip, where no more than 7,000 Israeli settlers reside amongst well over one million Palestinians, whose annual natural growth far exceeds the total settler population of this region. Many Israeli politicians, including those of the mainstream right (such as Prime Minister Sharon and Deputy Prime Minister Olmert, both known for their hard line and intransigent stances towards the Palestinians in the past) have come to an understanding that in the long term, the demographic "threat" facing the State is more dangerous than the military threats. For this reason, they have begrudgingly accepted the principle of the two state solution and the need for territorial separation. In this discourse, territory is of secondary importance to that of territory.

It is the irony of the right wing in Israel, the political faction that defines itself as constituting the "national" camp, that their insistence on the retention of territorial control of the Occupied Territories has brought about the conditions which must eventually bring about the establishment of a single bi-national State, with sharing of power between two equally sized Israeli and Palestinian populations. The alternative, namely the maintenance of a system of Occupation where Palestinians are denied their political rights and, in many cases, are no more than second class citizens (politically, economically, socially) is unacceptable to the majority of the Israeli population for whom the principle of a democratic State is no less important than that of a Jewish State. Only the most extreme right wing elements (albeit a growing element) advocate the transfer of the Arab-Palestinian population out of Israel to

neighbouring Arab countries as a means of dealing with the "demographic" problem. It could be argued that the majority of the right wing live in a state of denial to the fact that it is they who have created the single greatest security threat facing the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish State, while it is the extreme right wing nationalist elements who recognize the problem but, at one and the same time, advocate the implementation of immoral solutions such as transfer of ethnic minorities elsewhere.

Given this dilemma, it is no wonder that an increasing proportion of the Israeli population have come round to accepting the principle of a two state solution to the conflict, of which the Gaza Disengagement is seen by many as constituting no more than the first step in this direction, a direction which commenced with the Oslo Accords back in the mid-1990's, but which was brought to a halt by the renewal of violence.

Concluding Comments

It is clear from this brief discussion that the alternative notions of what exactly constitutes threat and vulnerability for the Israeli (Jewish) collective is a function of which of the security parameters is considered as paramount. Both sides agree that there is a necessity to retain a strong military superiority, at least for the foreseeable future, and that Israel is able to cope with any threats which may emanate from neighbouring countries. But for those for whom territory is of utmost importance, they perceive any form of withdrawal as constituting a security risk for the State, while for those for whom demography and the notion of a "Jewish state" is of utmost importance, withdrawal is a pre-condition for guaranteeing the long term security of the country. This is reflected in election campaigns which focus on the dual words of "Peace and Security", used by both of the major parties, with one arguing that security can only be achieved through peaceful resolution of the conflict, while the other argues that peace can only be achieved through hard line security controls of the territories and the population residing therein. It is an argument which has dominated the political agenda within Israel since the 1967 War and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.