

Internal Elements of National Resilience

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The last war in which Israel was called on to use all of its force was the Yom Kippur War, 43 years ago. Since then, Israel has been challenged by clashes, conflicts, and wars that did not require it to tap all of its available power. Instead, the main element put to the test was the endurance of Israeli society.

In his famous “victory speech” in May 2000, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared: “This Israel, which has nuclear weapons and the strongest warplanes in the region, I swear by Allah, is actually weaker than spider webs.” The spider web image reflected the idea that Israeli endurance is the weak link in Israel’s national resilience, and the idea has since taken hold among Israel’s enemies, particularly as a result of Israeli withdrawals in the wake of force exerted against it. The Oslo Accords (1993) have been explained as a withdrawal after the first intifada (1987-1991); the withdrawal from Lebanon (2000) is seen in the wake of IDF casualties in the security zone and the Four Mothers campaign; and the disengagement from the Gaza Strip (2005) is considered a direct result of the terrorist attacks in the area and rocket fire from Gaza. Exchanges of prisoners and hostages, in which Israel paid heavy prices, have also strengthened the “spider web” metaphor.

On the other hand, the sense of Israeli fortitude was strengthened in the wake of the resilience the society demonstrated in the face of both suicide terrorism, which peaked with the so-called al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2004), and rocket fire during the Second Lebanon War (2006); with the mobilization of reserves in operations in the Gaza Strip: Cast Lead, Pillar of Defense, and Protective Edge; the public’s mobilization for overall assistance – to

soldiers, injured people, civilians, and bereaved families – in the wake of the wave of stabbing, car-ramming, and shooting attacks (2015-16); and the refusal to give in to the demands of the other side.

I believe that the fortitude of Israeli society will continue to be put to the test, when Israel is targeted by its enemies and faced with various security challenges in the coming years. Since the conventional force of Israel's enemies has declined significantly – in the wake of the peace agreements and establishment of strategic relations with Egypt and Jordan, the erosion of the Syrian army, the irrelevance of additional Arab forces, and the distance from Iran – the main option that remains to them, in the absence of the ability to conquer significant territory and/or to damage the IDF seriously, is the recourse to terrorism, rockets, and missiles. These instruments are mainly directed against the civilian population, and thus civilians will continue to be a preferred target for attack.

The response to the threat against civilians is of course defensive: “active defense” for interception of rockets and missiles; and “passive defense” – early warning and protection. Removal of the threat, however, requires an offensive response – “the best defense is offense,” with the means to attack the enemy's capabilities and assets and exact a cost that renders it not worthwhile to continue the conflict. All of these are important for improving Israeli society's fortitude, but fortitude includes psychological elements of resilience, whose importance is no less than that of the physical elements.

Israeli society has struggled from the dawn of Zionism until today. The struggle for the establishment of a permanent Jewish national home and its defense in the present and in the future require unity and belief in the righteousness of the chosen path, as well as the willingness to defend the State of Israel, to the extent of risking one's life. The belief in the righteousness of the path, unity, solidarity, mutual responsibility, mobilization of individuals for the sake of the common good – these are the “soft” elements of national resilience, whose importance is invaluable.

As part of this year's strategic assessment, it is necessary to evaluate the status of these elements in the present and estimate their status in the future. Israeli society has proven itself in recent security tests, and demonstrated strong socio-national mobilization. It seems that successful confrontation of the security challenges, from Operation Defensive Shield (2002) until

today, casts doubt on the validity of the “spider web” theory. I believe that in the future as well Israeli society will enlist in support of necessary fighting, mobilize for mutual aid, and project strength in its fortitude. At the same time, there are phenomena that threaten these elements of resilience.

The discourse of fear, separation, hate, and delegitimization harms society’s unity and solidarity. This discourse has intensified in recent years against the backdrop of widespread use of social media. Expressions invalidating “the other,” to the point of racism and violence against Arabs, settlers, leftists, ultra-Orthodox, the LGBT community, and others, harm an important element of national resilience. This discourse also seeps into the traditional media and the Knesset. Political use of this discourse in order to garner votes is cynical and irresponsible.

The disparity between rich and poor also harms national resilience. The sense of alienation of have-nots, while others have an abundance and at times over-abundance, harms social unity (this, aside from moral aspects of the disparity).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict causes divisive internal debate as well as violent and dangerous phenomena. Isolated incidents of Jewish terrorism, “price tag” attacks, and violence from the right wing against police and soldiers, along with Breaking the Silence, Yesh Din, and other left wing groups are phenomena involving slander and lack of solidarity. In addition, against the backdrop of the conflict, a phenomenon of self-incrimination has developed. Many blame Israel, and especially the government, for not solving the conflict, even though the facts prove that Arab intransigence from the 1930s until today has not allowed a “solution of the conflict.” These phenomena, connected to the external conflict and resulting from it, affect internal social unity in Israel very negatively.

The rule of law is of prime importance, specifically in situations of internal debate and polarization. A number of events that occurred in the past year have undermined the rule of law. These include the political leadership standing aloof from phenomena such as illegal construction, illegal invasion of homes, and the Hebron shooting incident, as well as individual conduct that does not maintain integrity – all these undermine the respect that citizens, especially young people, should feel toward the law, and thus undermine national resilience. “Were it not for the fear of government, a

man would swallow his neighbor alive” (*Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 3, Mishnah 2).

Government corruption undermines the nation’s confidence in its leadership. Police investigations, indictments of senior officials, and convictions of the President, Prime Minister, ministers, and heads of government authorities cause a lack of confidence in the leadership, and serve as a negative example for citizens, especially the younger generation. This too causes serious harm to national resilience.

Belief in the righteousness of the Zionist path is of the utmost importance to the existence of a Jewish national home. Particularly when Israel’s enemies work to delegitimize the state and the Zionist path, there is great importance to internal mobilization in Israel and in the Jewish nation around the world, and in support for the State of Israel’s right to exist as the nation state of the Jewish people. This position must rest on a strong moral basis, which requires attention to all of the topics mentioned above.

The national camp’s attack on the media, courts, and senior state officials harms governance in a way that threatens the checks and balances of a democratic society, with disastrous consequences, and harms the public’s confidence in the country’s leadership and law enforcement system. The state and society require leadership that enjoys public confidence. When this confidence is undermined, national resilience is also undermined.

In coming years, given the absence of an existential threat to the State of Israel at this time and in light of the recognition that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unlikely to be settled in the near future, our efforts should be directed internally: to repair what needs repair among ourselves, in order to strengthen confidence in the leadership and to strengthen the internal unity and fortitude of Israeli society, with the aim of reinforcing these critical elements of the State of Israel’s national resilience.