

National Security Tools and the Fight against Domestic Violence

Pnina Sharvit Baruch

One of the side effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been a steep rise in an already high rate of domestic violence. This social phenomenon has negative effects in the short and long terms, including beyond the family unit, and it is in the national interest to combat it. To this end, components used to handle security threats can be tapped. First, without foregoing protection for victims of domestic violence, it is unacceptable that the primary response to the phenomenon is to transfer victims to shelters; the focus should instead be on the realm of prevention. Beyond that, as in the security field, one authority should be entrusted with overall responsibility to coordinate the fight against domestic violence and must possess a complete intelligence picture. Sufficient resources should be allocated, beginning with the streaming of the budget that was approved several years ago. Furthermore, the state should assume responsibility for the issue and not leave it to civil society organizations, and above all, a conceptual change is required, whereby the issue is defined as a threat at the national level and provided a requisite response.

One of the side effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdown and economic crisis has been a jump in the number of cases of domestic violence. There has been an increase of hundreds of percent in the number of appeals to emergency hotlines and dozens of percent in complaints filed with police. Cases have increased around the world, leading the United Nations to declare domestic violence a “shadow pandemic” of the coronavirus pandemic.

Should threats to personal security, which do not result from external threats or have a political backdrop, be considered an issue of national security? On the one hand, some would expand “national security” to “human security,” and include criminal or environmental threats that impact on the individual no less than external threats. On the other hand, there are those who claim that expanding the term “national security” creates undesirable obscurity, and is especially unsuitable for countries that, like Israel, are exposed to tangible military threats. Irrespective of the answer to this conceptual challenge, the broad scope of the phenomenon of domestic violence and the fact that it has negative effects, both short and long term, including beyond the family, underscores that this is a public problem that affects Israeli society in general. Therefore, there is unquestionably a

national interest in combating this phenomenon, and hence it is worthwhile seeing how tools from the national security realm can be of use in this battle.

In 2016, an inter-ministerial government committee on domestic violence (hereafter, the Committee) published a comprehensive report. The Committee defined domestic violence as violence that “occurs in the framework of the family and in context of the relations within it, including married couples or life partners, present or past, and harm done by a member of the extended family.” According to the report, some 28 percent of the total number of violent incidents in the country occur within the family; this figure relates to reported incidents, while there are in fact many cases that are not reported. The theme emphasized in the report was the need for collaboration between all the professional elements involved in handling the phenomenon as an underlying principle for improving national responses to the issue. The committee’s report was adopted as the basis for a national program adopted by the government in 2017.

At the international level, the Istanbul Convention, which is the European convention to prevent violence against women and domestic violence, states that countries have a duty to eradicate the phenomenon of violence against women, and details necessary steps to do so. The convention is open to countries outside of Europe; Israel in the past has considered joining, and the issue should be raised for debate again.

Domestic violence is not just violence by men against their partners, but also violence against children, and by children against their elderly parents. There are also cases of violence by women against their partners, although this is a relatively marginal phenomenon when compared to violence by men against women, and in particular regarding cases of extreme violence. Therefore, without minimizing the need for a response to all cases, focus on the primary phenomenon is more urgent.

There is a consensus among those involved in the field that the issue of domestic violence includes all kinds of manifestations of violence, including physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, and economic violence. A recent government bill seeking to add the ban on economic violence to the Prevention of Domestic Violence Law has met with opposition from a number of MKs, who argue that this legislation would harm the integrity of the family. While the wording of the proposal could perhaps be refined, voices such as those raised during the debate – that there is no reason to prevent a husband from having complete control over his wife’s income and expenses – encourage a reality that enables, and even allows, domestic violence. It is important that the issue be regulated by legislation forthwith.

In view of the extremely limited success of the fight against the phenomenon of domestic violence in Israel, it appears there is a need to rethink the issue. To this end, it is suggested that we consider how this struggle could be managed if we relate to the phenomenon as a “classic” security threat:

1. In response to a security threat, much emphasis is placed on threat prevention and not just on defense.
2. In order to respond to a security threat, there is a centralized system that oversees all elements, produces an overall situational picture, and implements a coordinated response.
3. The security response receives ample budgets and resources.
4. The security response is led by the state, with limited assistance from civil society bodies.
5. The security challenge is a top priority for the government and the public.

Clearly how the security threat is addressed differs sharply from the approach to domestic violence. There is no doubt that taking an approach that adopts even some of the above components could fundamentally change the response to this phenomenon.

First, without giving up on or detracting from the current response to domestic violence through hot lines, shelters, and rehabilitation, it is unacceptable that the primary response received by the victims of domestic violence is to send them and their children to shelters. Efforts should focus on prevention as well.

Uprooting domestic violence requires cultural and social changes that will lead to a balance of power within the family and reduce the scope of control and force that can be operated against women. The emphasis should be on education from a young age and the advancement of gender equality. A parallel to such moves in the world of national security would be reaching a peace agreement that prevents the creation of the threat from the start. In both cases this is a long term objective that one should strive toward, but alone cannot suffice.

On a more practical level, prevention includes effective treatment vis-à-vis perpetrators of violence. Comprehensive programs are required to treat violent men, including rehabilitation for those convicted of violence and conditioning release from prison on the implementation of rehabilitation procedures. Prevention also includes empowering women and providing tools to improve their ability to protect themselves and their families. These should include economic tools that enable them to stand on their own so they can free themselves from a violent partner.

Prevention requires gathering and making use of intelligence. Families at risk of being dragged into the cycle of domestic violence, or which are already there, should be identified. Women need safe and effective channels for reporting violence. It is also important to widen the sources of intelligence beyond the victims themselves. Thus, elements that come into contact with victims, such as medical teams or other service providers, should be trained to recognize signs that point to violence and assist the victims in getting help. It is imperative that all sources of intelligence feed into an overall inclusive intelligence picture. In this context, the Committee recommended the creation of an integral and coordinated tool for assessing risk and improving the flow of information between the various bodies, while removing obstacles that create difficulties in the transfer of information.

In addition, there is a need to negate the ability of the assailant to use violence, by creating an effective array of restraining and protection orders that are strictly implemented, including a response to the threat posed by assailants after their release from arrest or prison.

Another aspect of prevention is the use of deterrence. Instances of violence must be seriously investigated and met with harsh sentences. Cases of minor violence as well, including threats and non-physical violence, must be investigated and punished severely. When 60 percent of complaints against domestic violence are closed without any measures taken, not only is deterrence hurt, but the opposite is achieved, and a message is sent that there is violence can be carried out with impunity. Another price that must be exacted is a social price. Assailants must know that society will castigate them and they will be excluded if they are violent. To achieve this, there is a need for social change, focusing on education, especially in sectors where a husband's aggressive behavior toward his wife is accepted with understanding and even support by his community.

There is also room for improvement in the field of defense of victims of violence, both through the addition of defensive measures, including technological means and improved treatment and rehabilitation.

Beyond all these, the other elements mentioned above that characterize how security challenges are met should be adopted as part of the response to domestic violence. First, one authority should be entrusted with overall responsibility to coordinate the fight against domestic violence, possess the complete intelligence picture, oversee and integrate the response, and have the power and means to deal with the issue. Second, adequate resources are required. To begin with, the budget approved for the implementation of the 2017 plan for the prevention and treatment of domestic violence should be released immediately. Third, the state should assume responsibility for the issue, with the help of civil society

bodies, but without leaving them with responsibility for the issue. Above all, a conceptual change is required: the issue should be defined as a threat at the national level that gains the attention of senior decision makers and the general public, and receive the appropriate response.

This article is part of a new research project on the subject of innovative approaches to prevent domestic violence, and is supported by the Michal Sela Forum and the Bat Melech NGO.