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National Security Challenges Lean toward the Internal Arena
Insights from the INSS 14th Annual Conference, January 2021

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The INSS 14th Annual International Conference, "National Security in an Atmosphere of Global and Internal Disorder," was held on January 26-28, 2021. Participating in the conference were foreign ministers (from Germany, India, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Israel), party leaders in Israel, guest experts from Israel and abroad, and INSS researchers. The discussions and lectures highlighted four key motifs that will affect Israel's national security in the coming year – two related to the external-regional and international arena, and two to the internal arena: (1) Israel's normalization agreements with the countries of the region and the prospect of their expansion; (2) The new United States administration: a transition from the Trump era to the Biden era, with its goal to return to former rules of the game, based on multilateral diplomacy and alliances; (3) the coronavirus pandemic, which has created a societal, economic, and governance crisis in Israel, and is expected to have long-term and significant implications beyond the coming year; (4) The cumulative damage in Israel as a result of repeated election campaigns, which makes it difficult for the state to address, let alone successfully, its weaknesses and the challenges before it.

On January 26-28, 2021, the 14th Annual International Conference of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) was held, entitled: "National Security in an Atmosphere of Global and Internal Disorder." Participating in the conference were foreign ministers (from Germany, India, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Israel), party leaders in Israel, guest experts from Israel and abroad, and INSS researchers.

The underlying purpose of the conference was to present and analyze the state of Israel's national security at the present time, with an integrated view, directed outward and inward. The dominant global trend is disorder, stemming from competition between world powers; undermined international rules of the game, due in part to changes in perception and policy during the Trump administration that rejected principles of multilateralism; and the coronavirus pandemic, which has highlighted conflicts of interest and tensions between countries. A second, parallel trend is a broadened concept of national security, so that in addition to classic military issues, it includes perspectives on technology, economy, climate, healthcare, welfare, public opinion, and social cohesion. In this view, national

security expresses the relationship between the set of external and internal challenges facing the state, and the state's ability to confront them successfully.

The stability of the State of Israel and its ability to deal with the challenges facing it in 2021 and beyond is decidedly affected, both directly and indirectly, by its position in relation to all of these issues. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed Israel's internal weaknesses and the shortcomings that have existed for years and did not receive proper attention or responses in the healthcare realm, and even more so, in terms of the social fabric and relations among groups in Israeli society. This phenomenon is reflected in the INSS National Security Index: findings indicate an increasing difficulty in overcoming gaps and threats at the internal level, which impacts on the ability to deal with external challenges. A survey of experts, conducted ahead of the conference, also clearly showed greater importance ascribed to internal threats than in previous years when ranked on a comparative scale with external threats.

The conference's discussions and lectures highlighted four key motifs that will affect Israel's national security in the coming year. This list also reflects the expansion of the concept of national security. It includes two motifs related to the external arena – regional and international – and two to the internal arena:

1. Israel's normalization agreements with the countries of the region and the prospect of their expansion.
2. The new United States administration: a transition from the Trump era to the Biden era, with its goal to return to former rules of the game, based on multilateral diplomacy and alliances.
3. The coronavirus pandemic, which has created a societal, economic, and governance crisis in Israel, and is expected to have long-term and significant implications beyond the coming year.
4. The cumulative damage in Israel as a result of repeated election campaigns, which makes it difficult for the state to address, let alone successfully, its weaknesses and the challenges before it.

The Regional Environment

The Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain symbolize Israel's joining the coalition of pragmatic Sunni states, which is a counterweight to the Iranian-Shiite axis and which seeks to consolidate regional stability and prosperity. A discussion was held at the conference with the participation of the Foreign Ministers of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.

Dr. Anwar Gargash, United Arab Emirates Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, stressed: "It has barely been five months ago we announced the Abraham Accords, and so much has happened already. Together we have broken the perception that change in the region is impossible. Peace and dialogue are our tools as we move forward." In his view, "peace has three dimensions: political; cultural – breaking down demonization and barriers; and tangible – investments, business, tourism, technology, and joint ventures." In other words,

creating relations with Israel stems in part from the understanding that the disconnect and disregard for Israel as an integral part of the region inhibited the pragmatic Arab states and did not allow them to advance a vision of regional stability and technological progress. Indeed, since the establishment of the relations, about 40 cooperation agreements have been signed in a variety of areas, including agriculture, healthcare, finance, technology, and trade.

Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Foreign Minister of Bahrain, stressed that peace provides benefits to its partner countries and serves as an incentive for other countries to follow the same path. The two Arab ministers pointed to a significant advantage inherent in positioning the three countries together vis-à-vis the new administration in the United States, i.e., a unified voice on the return to the nuclear agreement with Iran: "not postponing the acquisition of nuclear capability by Iran, but rather removing that possibility"; and also in terms of opposition to Iran's missile program and its negative impact across the Middle East. The decision to normalize relations with Israel also stemmed from the understanding among the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, as well as Sudan and Morocco, that the road to Washington is shorter through Jerusalem, and that establishing relations with Israel may increase attention to their positions and interests in the US administration.

Both ministers expressed hope that the momentum of the Abraham Accords would translate into renewed progress toward resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, based on the two-state solution. While they seem to have invoked the Palestinian issue given their commitment to Arab public opinion, it is clear that the Iranian challenge poses a major threat to them, pushing the Palestinian issue off the center of the agenda. However, the interests shared by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Israel in relation to the Iranian threat does not mean that the Arab states will allow Israeli fighter jets to take off from their territories to attack Iran, due to fears of an Iranian response against them.

As part of the conference, a war game was held, based on a scenario following a series of terrorist attacks and missile attacks on targets in Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and US forces in Iraq. The attacks were interpreted as Iranian revenge for the killing of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and the head of the Iranian nuclear project, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. The simulation was designed to examine the significance of the formation of the new axis – comprising the Gulf states and Israel – regarding the possibility of joint action against Iran and its proxies, first and foremost Hezbollah. All the actors – Iran, Hezbollah, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states – tried to control the events and manage them while limiting their intensity and the number of days of active combat, but it turned out that the dynamics of escalation could not be stopped. In other words, although most actors do not aspire to widespread war, their code of conduct, which requires a response to any event, as well as the dominant language of power in the region and not the language of diplomacy, created an escalation dynamic that led to war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Another insight from the simulation was that Iran has limited control over its proxies on the Iranian-Shiite axis. Hezbollah in particular, ostensibly committed to the Iranian agenda of seeking to preserve and strengthen the organization's missile array, which is designed to deter Israel or respond to an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear sites, adhered to its image as a resistance force, seeking credit for some achievement against Israel. Another insight was the impossibility of curbing regional escalation in the absence of international termination mechanisms: neither Russia nor the United States was able to stem regional escalation. Not even Russia was able to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from turning Syria's territory into a battlefield in a confrontation with Israel, and a regional stabilization mechanism was not formulated.

Between the Strategic and the Operational

At the conference, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi assessed that Israel's security situation is improving, and the deterrence it displays has even intensified. In his view, overall, Israel's enemies have no interest in initiating offensive activity against it, but they are committed to responsive action (as indeed illustrated in the war simulation). Israel has an advantage due to a close circle of intelligence and operational capabilities: "We are present in many places intelligence-wise, and operationally we have extensive freedom of action throughout the Middle East."

The Chief of Staff also stressed that the main threat to Israel is posed by Iran's nuclear program. "Iran is building capabilities that will allow it to leap to produce a bomb at a rapid pace, in months and possibly weeks." In this context, he presented a firm position: "My view is that a return to the nuclear agreement of 2015 is both bad and incorrect. Operationally and strategically, all Iranian ability to reach a nuclear capability should be prevented. Therefore I instructed the IDF to prepare operational plans for action on the issue. It is the political echelon that decides on the operation, but the plans must be prepared." (The Chief of Staff's reference to the possibility of the United States returning to the nuclear deal with Iran drew media and political criticism, due to its being the first statement on the issue with regard to the Biden administration, before a dialogue took place at the political echelon.) The second most important threat, according to Lt. Col. Kochavi, is terrorist militias – enemy forces that have standard military equipment and whose activities are completely military but are also terrorist organizations since they hide within urban areas and their purpose is to harm the Israeli civilian home front. The IDF's operational response, he said, is focused on preventing the radical axis from entrenching itself in the northern arena: "In 2020, we attacked over five hundred targets," with the purpose of preventing the acquisition of precision weapons and defending borders.

The Chief of Staff estimated that many missiles would hit Israel during a war, and the IDF intends to launch a widespread attack on this threat, including in the enemy's densely populated urban areas. "And I am already warning the citizens of Gaza and Lebanon, as soon as tensions begin, leave the place where you are if it is rife with missiles and rockets." His remarks conveyed distinctly that buildings in the enemy's urban area in which weapons

and missile launchers aimed at Israel are hidden are military targets and will therefore be attacked, by saying that, the Chief of Staff imparted a clear deterrent message.

The Internal Challenges

The coronavirus pandemic has created a multi-faceted crisis, which has affected all aspects and components of Israeli society and the political arena. With the outbreak of the health crisis, existing problem areas – social, economic, and even political – became more and more acute.

Measures designed to curb the spread of the disease paralyzed large parts of the economy and caused severe economic damage, especially to deciles 3-6. Consequently, inequality was exacerbated and labor market insecurity. This also hurt many people on an emotional level. The sense of social solidarity has weakened and the ties between the sectors that comprise Israeli society have been undermined. There was a lack of transparency in the information and logic of decisions. Moreover, the centralized government management of the crisis, riddled with ego-wars between the political and professional, without adherence to strictness and enforcement, aroused among the general public a sense that the policy was driven by narrow political considerations. This feeling, compounded by the political crisis that brings Israel to Knesset elections for the fourth time in two years, caused a significant decline in trust in the leadership. All these weaknesses challenge making and implementing decisions, mobilizing the public to cooperate, and facing the ongoing challenge of the pandemic on all levels. The result is undermined national security.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Israel's strategic situation in the face of external challenges is positive. The regional system is enmeshed in a health, economic, and societal crisis, and the countries around Israel are all dealing with their respective problems. Against this background, Israel's enemies do not want a war with it. Moreover, the normalization agreements between Israel and pragmatic Sunni states may be a step toward the expansion of the regional alliances, which include Israel. On the other hand, focused attention and many resources are essential for economic and societal reconstruction in Israel.

The recovery process from the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing complex crisis should focus not only on the health and economic dimensions. It is imperative that efforts be devoted to tighten the thread connecting the various sectors in Israeli society, and concentrating attention on welfare, aimed at reducing inequality and addressing vulnerable populations. These goals will not be achieved without improving and sharpening the effectiveness of governance, strengthening the authority of the civic institutions that are at the core of democracy, and encouraging dialogue and mutual respect between the various groups in society.

At the conference, several principles and policy recommendations were raised:

- Change in national priorities: resource-intensive investment is required to revive the economy, welfare, and society, even if this requires a cut in the defense budget.
- Labor market security is the main economic challenge: it is essential to use the opportunities latent in the crisis to improve the labor market and increase productivity.
- The centralization of the government must be reduced, and powers delegated to local authorities in imposing and enforcing restrictions, as well as in facilitating trade, education, society, and culture. In other words, the authorities' close connection with their populations and their knowledge of the public space, as well as their ability to harness communities for cooperation in order to deal with the crisis, must be maximized.
- It is necessary to establish a mechanism for managing national crises (that is not part of the IDF), which will function continuously and include a planning department that will focus on building readiness for the next crisis.
- Determination is required on the part of the government, the police, and the judicial system in enforcing law and order among communities that violate guidelines in a systematic and organized manner (following their presentation at the conference of "uncontrolled enclaves," where the government, police, and authorities are reluctant to enforce law and order).
- Education should be at the center and the education system should be quickly adapted to the requirements and conditions of the hour, especially if living in the presence of the coronavirus continues for an extended period.
- Technology carries Israel's economy and its regional and global status. It is important to strengthen Israel's relative advantage in the field of cyber and artificial intelligence. Digitization must also be used as a means of reducing gaps and accessibility difficulties.

What is needed in order to advance these weighty goals is, first and foremost, leadership that the public can value and trust, as well as improved governance – governmental stability, equal enforcement, and sound legal authority. An improved ability to make decisions and implement them in all areas of life and policy will improve the chances of economic growth and social rehabilitation – two basic conditions for the national security of the State of Israel.