STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

A Multidisciplinary Journal on National Security

Special Publication | October 2020

INSS
המכון למחקרי ביטחון לאומי
THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY אוניברסיטת תל אביב

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Strategic Assessment: A Multidisciplinary Journal on National Security is a quarterly journal published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). It aims to challenge and to enrich the scholarly debate and public discourse on a range of subjects related to national security in the broadest sense of the term. Along with its focus on Israel and the Middle East, the journal includes articles on national security in the international arena as well. Academic and research-based articles are joined by policy papers, professional forums, academic surveys, and book reviews, and are written by INSS researchers and guest contributors. The views presented are those of the authors alone.

The Institute for National Security Studies is a public benefit company.

Printing: Orniv Ltd., Holon

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Strategic Assessment is published in English and Hebrew.

ISSN 0793-8950

Israel National Trail marker

The Israel National Trail as a Place of Refuge

Tamar Hermann

Introduction

Only a historical perspective can ultimately determine whether the State of Israel experienced an existential nadir during the second decade of the 21st century or rather a series of passing crises. To be sure, until March 2020, with the eruption of the Covid-19 crisis, Israel enjoyed considerable achievements in the first two decades of the new millennium. The economy remained relatively stable even when many other countries suffered major economic turbulence; national security stabilized at a reasonable or better state while much of the Middle East weathered severe upheaval; and in many respects, Israel's international standing grew stronger despite the severe criticism from heads of state and civil society organizations such as the BDS movement. The strategic alliance with the United States grew deeper, and strong multidimensional connections were forged with other countries, such as India.

However, in other realms the situation is much less rosy. The political channel with the Palestinians, which showed no significant development in years, is blocked. The national consensus regarding the character of the state and its desirable future has eroded; some would say it has dissipated to the point where the Israeli public is practically divided into "tribes," with more that separates people and sectors than unites them. The socioeconomic gaps expanded, and terms like "the State of Tel Aviv" and "center vs. periphery" dominate much of the public discourse, which has become increasingly unrestrained, provocative, and contrarian.

Electoral politics also seems to have reached an impasse, leading to an unprecedented whirlwind of three election campaigns in one year (April 2019 to March 2020), without a clear outcome deciding between the opposing blocs. Elections were followed by even more profound gaps between the blocs, which did not disappear with the establishment of the emergency government in May 2020. "Right" and "left" stopped serving as distinguishing analytical terms, mainly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Similar to the "Democrat" and "Republican" labels in the US or the "Conservative" and "Liberal" labels elsewhere, they now connote two implicitly opposed views of public life, including attitudes toward the judicial system, led by the Supreme Court; religion-state tensions and the proper division between the country's "Jewish" and "democratic" faces; the civil status of non-Jews in the State of Israel; the extent of government involvement in the economy; the status of women; the rights of the LGBTQ community; and more. Empirical findings show that this is a significant fissure that cuts Israeli society almost in half, and particularly the Jewish majority (Hermann et al., 2019). These internal rifts are compounded by threatening global developments such as the Covid-19 crisis, whose long-term ramifications are unclear, but which will doubtless continue to cause major tumult in Israel, as in many other countries.

The Trail offers people a sense, or illusion, of a place that is "clean" of political and social filth, and is a "suspended space" of sorts, where there are only good people and good deeds, untouched nature, and an agreed-upon national heritage.

As a result, conscious distress and heavy concerns about the present and the future are prevalent among wide circles in Israeli society ("Israeli democracy is on the edge of the abyss"), while in other circles there is considerable satisfaction regarding the changes underway in Israeli society and politics. However, although some are less concerned about the rifts dividing Israeli society, which they see as the unavoidable outcome of a positive socio-demographic transformation of the elite, all groups are showing—for different reasons—a strong lack of confidence in political institutions and public figures in official positions (Hermann et al., 2019). This disquiet—which is gnawing at national security from within, so that it is perhaps considered a "soft" element but with potential to cause serious damage—has more than once pushed people to want to distance themselves from the familiar and prevalent and instead search for alternative comfort zones, whether permanent (such as migration) or temporary. Indeed, studies show that the phenomenon of backpacking in distant countries developed in the 1970s largely as a reaction to the desire of Israeli young people to disconnect following the Yom Kippur War (Noy, 2006). A similar desire for distance from irritating or burdensome reality, "escapism," as it were, has in recent years pushed thousands of Israelis to spend days, weeks, and even months, in other places or "bubbles"—abroad, in fitness centers, in elegant hotels or luxurious restaurants, and on the Israel National Trail (INT). The Trail offers people a sense, or illusion, of a place that is "clean" of political and social filth, and is a "suspended space" of sorts, where there are only good people and good deeds, untouched nature, and an agreed-upon national heritage.

The "Biography" of the Trail

The Israel National Trail[1] (in Arabic, Darb el-Balad, meaning Trail of the Land[2]) stretches over some 1,000 km,[3] from Beit Ussishkin in Kibbutz Dan to about 100 meters before the Taba border crossing near the Eilat field school. Walking the trail at an accelerated pace from Dan to Eilat can take about 45 consecutive days, and about 60 days at a slower pace. The two end points are insignificant on their own, and have no "sanctity" of any kind, which is in contrast with pilgrimage trails that always

end at meaningful sites such as the Kaaba in Mecca, or in the past, the Temple in Jerusalem. Israel is about 610 km long from end to end as the crow flies, so that the INT, which winds and curves at various points, is almost twice as long as the country. Like quite a few other long trails in the world, mainly national trails, the Israel National Trail is at once organic and artificial, a heritage trail and a nature trail. In other words, it is a combination of natural trails that existed beforehand, with new and planned connecting segments. In addition to the different types of landscapes, surfaces, and vegetation, plans also aimed to encompass many historical and heritage sites that resonate with collective historical memory, in almost all cases the Jewish-Zionist memory.

> The living and the dead are present all the time, and their presence touches the heart. The trail is scattered with graves and monuments connected to historical struggles, and even to love. They are always visible in the beautiful vista, as if the lives of the people are intertwined with the landscapes in which they lived or which they loved, landscapes that we imagine they wanted to view from their final resting place. (Gilat, 2011, p. 8)

Although considered a "national trail," the INT does not, and never did, have statutory status. Since no minutes were kept of the planning meetings, it is unclear why no request was ever submitted for such status, but it seems that the Trail's planners chose not to do so, since statutory status requires creating a protected "corridor" along each path. This would have required expropriation of large swaths of land, and marking the route would have been delayed by a few years if not decades. Even though it lacks statutory status, the INT is now considered the "meta-trail" of the trail network in Israel, and based on this status, it "imposes" its markers on the trails incorporated within it.

The idea for creating the Trail was formulated and promoted from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s by a journalist named Avraham Tamir, who was influenced by his trek on the Appalachian Trail in the United States. It was there that Tamir sensed not only the pleasure of a long hike, but also of the potential for economic development that a trail with many trail-lovers could bring, as it would spur the creation of a support system, including food, lodging, transport, medicine, equipment, and accessories connected with the trail, and more. In 1984, Tamir began his efforts toward this modern pioneering project, and contacted the Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, Yoav Sagi, who put him in touch with Ori Dvir, who (until mid-2011) was the Chairman of the Committee for Israel's Trails. Dvir was taken with the idea of creating a national trail, which could provide something of a solution to questions since the mid-1970s regarding the fundamental nature and purpose of Israeli hiking. Dvir also understood that the project that Tamir formulated could inject new blood into the marking system of Israel's trails, which had been exhausted by the mid-80s (Rabineau, 2013, p. 228). Tamir and Dvir submitted a proposal for the Trail project, with a course from Dan to Eilat. The proposal was approved by the Committee for Israel's Trails, and the project was launched in 1985.

The proposed route of the INT was defined according to a set of principles, chief among them:

a. *Diversity*: The formative idea of the Trail was to expose individuals to the greatest variety of landscapes, communities, people, religions, and sites.
b. *Safety and security*: Much thought was devoted in the planning process to the matter of personal safety. This principle, for instance, led to the controversial decision to maintain distance from the Green Line and from areas with dense Arab populations.[4]
c. *Non-entry into residential areas and urban localities*: This principle, which later

dissipated with the addition of new walking paths, was central in Dvir's thought when drawing the original route, although it did not reconcile with the principle of diversity. It encountered fierce criticism from the outset, particularly regarding the fact that the Trail did not enter Jerusalem. There were even those who viewed this as bowing to challenges regarding the legitimacy of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

d. *Awareness of climate conditions*: The planners strove to make it possible to walk on the Trail all year round. Those walking the Trail in one shot prefer to begin in the south during the winter so that they can reach the north when it is warmer, where temperatures are lower and water is much more readily available, or to begin in the north in the summer and end in the winter in the warm and relatively dry south.
e. *Starting point*: Many reasons were given for the choice of Kibbutz Dan and not the Hermon as the starting point, but it seems that the decisive reason was left unsaid: the unspoken desire to remain within the Green Line.[5]

At first, Dvir and his team tried to draft the route in coordination with various interested parties. They turned to tour guides, JNF officials, Parks and Nature Authority supervisors, and guides from the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, asking them to recommend segments that they found important or interesting. It quickly became clear that the recommendations contradicted each other, and amounted to a total of 10,000 km! The planners therefore opted to take the recommendations into account, but to decide on the route on their own. The plan for the Trail was announced to the public after the marking had begun, but before it was completed. Avraham Tamir hoped that the marking would be done quickly enough for him to see the completion of the project in his lifetime, but the work took more than a decade. Tamir died in 1988, and was not able to see the end of the road.

In the first stage of marking, the planners-markers resisted the temptation to set the path along the Roman mountain road, since such a choice would have directed the path straight into the heart of the West Bank. It was therefore decided to cut westward. They moved directly from marking the north to marking the south, and only then to the center. The main problem in the south was IDF firing ranges. Alongside the issue of accessibility (firing ranges are open to civilians only on weekends and holidays), for security reasons, the firing ranges were not labeled on civilian maps available to those planning the route. The Negev, therefore, appeared open for marking, but in actuality this was not the case. Consequently, when the Trail's markers came to this stretch, it became clear that determining the route was more difficult and forced than in the north. The result is that significant portions of the Trail in the Negev are not very interesting, while places of tremendous interest, important historical sites, and singular communities remain outside the route.

In April 1995, during the Passover holiday, after more than a decade of discussions and work on marking the route, the Israel National Trail was dedicated—at the time with a length of about 850 km—by President Ezer Weizmann, at a widely-covered festive ceremony at the Armored Corps Memorial Site at Latrun. It was a distinctly Israeli-Jewish-Zionist inaugural celebration. Although apparently coincidental, 1995 was a defining moment in the Israeli-Jewish consciousness. There was no progress in peace negotiations with the Palestinians, and there was a large and growing wave of Palestinian terrorism that deepened the disputes among the Israeli-Jewish public regarding the benefits of the Oslo process. The dedication of the Trail was therefore a kind of "island" of celebratory national achievement during a sober period.

Despite the celebration, the Trail encountered significant skepticism. More than a few naturalists and walking fans in Israel saw it as a gimmick that was destined to fail. They saw no logic in the choice of a specific continuum of existing

trails, their packaging with uniform markings, and their marketing together as one brand, and envisioned little that would spur any change in the public's walking patterns. However,

> They erred in a big way…The Israel National Trail caused a significant change in Israeli nature walking….All that was done was to package a series of existing trails in a new context—a single continuous trail from Dan to Eilat. This new context caused me and many like me to become "Trailists" and to go on an amazing trek that may well continue for many years. (Merhav, 2013)

Nonetheless, the official inauguration of the Trail did not put it in the center of public discourse. In effect, in the first decade of the Trail's existence, it was almost "underground," and few people attempted it. Walking the Trail became "fashionable" only about 15 years later. The increasing awareness of the Trail did not take place on its own, but came about due to the tremendous efforts of a number of people who were smitten with it. Today, the Trail is a major success: "This trail is one hell of a trail. It's beautiful. It's not for nothing that it's such a success. It overpowers the Appalachians" (Halfon, quoted by Goldstein, 2011). In his book, Halfon adds:

> The Trail has won much praise thus far, and deserves it all. Much thought was put into it. It is diverse and interesting, and manages to capture a lot of this small country. Its very existence makes it a brand name that creates curiosity and has sent thousands of individuals into the country's landscapes—I among them—who likely would not have done so without it. (Halfon, 2008, p. 130)

In 2003, in the context of the second intifada, part of the Trail's route in the Sharon region was diverted about 30 kilometers westward from the foothills toward the Mediterranean Sea, moving farther away from the "seam line." While until then the Trail took civilians between orchards and fields along the Green Line, individuals were now worried about being too close to the area. In addition, communities such as Kochav Yair and Tzur Yigal that previously opposed the erection of fences around them now demanded surrounding fences, and these demands were met. This change affected the route of the Trail, and also prompted the Trail to shift westward.

Beyond the security consideration, there were additional reasons for various changes. The first is prosaic: Israel is a growing and evolving country, and the Trail at times must change in response to developments on the ground. Thus, the pavement of new roads, mainly in the south, made it necessary to move the Trail, although generally not very far. Another example occurred in 2000, when approval began for development of the phosphate mine in Sde Barir near Arad. The site was supposed to be built along the Trail, which made it necessary to move the route to the edge of Arad—an adjustment that helps those on the Trail from a logistical standpoint in terms of supplies for their continued trek. Certain changes to the route were required by the development of the Trans-Israel Highway (Highway 6), which "ran over" segments of the Trail near the Eyal interchange.

Another reason the Committee for Israel's Trails decided to change the route was the desire to designate segments for walking only, since over time significant parts of the original route became multi-purpose, serving walkers, ATV drivers, and bicyclists. Substantive changes were made to the original route of the Trail in the Negev, given its proximity to firing ranges on the one hand and to the Egyptian border on the other. Due to restrictions on entering firing ranges, the original route included long and boring segments, mainly along Route 40. In retrospect, better solutions for these restrictions existed than what was adopted at the start of the process, and the Trail was moved slightly.

The worsening problem of migrant workers and refugees infiltrating from Egyptian territory, as well as the concern over weapons smuggling, led to the government decision in 2010 to build a fence along the border with Egypt. The Ministry of Defense demanded that the Trail be moved again, and parts of it were closed to walkers due to construction work on the fence. Another change, although less material, was made on the edge of the Ramon Crater due to the desire of senior officials in the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel to direct the Trail to its local field school so that individuals would visit the place and likely stay overnight.

In December 2017, following efforts by the director of the Gush Etzion field school, who did not hide the political motive for his move, Tourism Minister Yariv Levin (Likud) announced a new initiative called the "Trans-Israel Trail," which was supposed to lead a branch of the INT over the Green Line. The new branch, which aroused fierce debate between supporters of the change from the right of the political map and its opponents from the left, was expected to traverse the length and breadth of the country, including the West Bank and Jerusalem. The government's decision on the matter was purportedly apolitical, although it was clear that had a different government been in power, it is doubtful whether the same decision would have been reached. The decision also called for examining the existing route, and finding ways to enhance it and make it more attractive to international tourism. The Ministry of Tourism allocated ten million shekels to formulate a plan for the old-new Trail—a much higher amount than allocated by the government for the old route for similar needs. An inter-ministerial committee was established to discuss this change, and it submitted a final report. But due to the domestic political upheaval since then, the process was essentially frozen even before it took shape, and it is doubtful whether it will be resumed in the foreseeable future.

Another change in the route was made in the fall of 2019. Following years of discussion and thought, the INT got a "face lift" with the addition of a branch in the south that runs through a number of the most beautiful and historic sites in Israel previously not included, such as Masada and the Dead Sea. The change, which added about 90 km to the route, involved a long planning process, cooperation between many entities, and extensive investment in the establishment of overnight camp grounds that now enable walking this segment without the need of outside assistance. The change also makes it possible to sleep in lodging places of various levels, from hotels in Ein Bokek to free overnight camp grounds, and even to reach the start and end point by public transit.

Even the very marking of the Trail aroused strong disputes of the type that are well-known in other countries, between the purists who are opposed to the entry of civilians into pristine nature and those who think that such walks should be encouraged. The most strident opposition came from a considerable number of guides at the Society for the Protection of Nature's field schools immediately when the marking of the Trail began. In their view, it is worth conserving the culture of walking unmarked trails that was prominent in the early days of the *yishuv*, the Jewish community in the Land of Israel before the establishment of the state, and the hikes in the Sinai Peninsula when it was controlled by Israel. From a desire to conserve "untouched" nature, they opposed any move to leave a human footprint in natural areas. In certain places, their opposition reached the point of erasing and removing the new Trail markers. In contrast, Ori Dvir and other supporters of the markers viewed this opposition as a sign of far-reaching professional fundamentalism, irresponsibility toward those on the Trail, and even ignorance (Rabinau, 2013, p. 261). Yet even some hikers with more moderate views and hiking patterns were uncomfortable with the markers, which in their opinion was just one part of a larger hostile takeover by the nature authorities. A middle ground was presented by David Michaeli, an

educator and writer who leads many walks and hikes, partly among youth who dropped out of conventional educational institutions and are in rehabilitative frameworks. In his view, the Trail was marked for two reasons. The first is positive—the concern over a takeover by foreign real estate interests of open areas, which are already few and far between in Israel. The second reason was less noble: the desire of the responsible parties—the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, the Nature and Parks Authority, and the JNF—to take over these areas themselves (D. Michaeli, personal interview, November 4, 2014).

Why Walk the Trail?

Two cultural influences converge to lead individuals to the Trail. The first, the culture of walking, is global, and the second is uniquely Israeli, reflecting the Israeli walking tradition.

The Culture of Walking

Although it may seem strange today, walking in nature for reasons other than practical or utilitarian but just for its own purpose was historically—until about 350 years ago—considered dangerous and not worthwhile. Walking for pleasure outside the household or urban area began to become accepted in the mid-17th century, first in Europe, and then in other parts of the world. Walking in nature as an activity that could purify the mind and shake off the ills of city life was deeply implanted in the romantic tradition of the 17th and 18th centuries. But the leap forward and the expansion to much broader layers of the public came with the rise of modern nationalism in the 19th century. From the outset, modern nationalism exalted walking throughout the country, mainly in nature. Its proponents understood that walking creates an intimate connection with a locale, links individuals with the landscapes of the homeland—the trees, rocks, rivers—and thereby enhances loyalty to the national collective.

Walking in nature and the unmediated acquaintance with native landscape were considered leading educational tools for strengthening patriotism. Therefore, from the 19th century onward—the golden age of nationalism—walking became an activity that national and nationalist forces supported and encouraged enthusiastically. The developed European system of trail markers grew along and in direct connection with the rise of modern nationalism. In particular, the German national movement glorified walking in nature as part of the connection to the soul of the nation, which essentially lacked a unifying historical infrastructure and was divided by factors such as competing religious allegiances (Gertel, 2002).

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Beyond nationalism, the development of a leisure culture also contributed to the popularity of walking in nature. Walking the Israel National Trail is a classic leisure walk of the type that has become increasingly common since the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, leisure walking is a specific type of tourist activity. Tourism is a leading social, cultural, economic, and even political phenomenon of steadily rising volume and importance. It is now the most common reason for movement among people, and has become an economic gold mine and an integral part of mass culture. Tourism in most cases involves some kind of travel and distancing from the place of residence and routine for a limited period that is generally defined in advance. It can be domestic or international: people who remain in their country but travel away from their places of residence and their routines and consume tourism services are also tourists, according to the accepted understanding of this term. The Trail is therefore a prime tourist element according to every parameter, and most of those who walk it are Israelis.

Hiking, or trekking, is most common among young people who are in good physical condition, although it has become an activity common among older people as well. In the past, and to a certain extent today, extended tourism for its own sake was mainly the purview of those with means, who could allow themselves to take time off from life's routine and constraints in order to pursue and finance the pleasures of travel or hiking—at a distance and to a distance. With the democratization of life in general, the matter of tourism has also become the domain of broader classes of society, although income is still a major restriction on the ability to disconnect and move about, particularly for prolonged periods. Studies show that walking and hiking tourists are on average more educated (an increase in education usually brings with it a higher awareness of nature and the environment) and have higher than average income (or potential income) (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Walking was one of the building blocks of the Israeli civil religion and a main link in the design and solidification of the renewed ties between the Jewish nation in Israel and the territory under its control.

Gender also plays a role, and more hikers are men. Feminist senior researcher Cynthia Enole contends that tourism is as much ideology as physical movement; a package of ideas about industrial, bureaucratic life and a set of presumptions about manhood, education, and pleasure (Enloe, 1989).

A survey by two researchers from the University of Haifa, Nurit Kliot and Noga Collins-Kreiner, conducted for the Ministry of Tourism in the context of the Israel National Trail, found that there are more male hikers (57 percent) than female (43 percent). The primary age group of those on the Trail is 20–29 (42 percent), while the second-largest age group is those aged 50–59 (21 percent). In other words, people in the intermediate age range, who are occupied with building careers and families, are on the INT less than those younger and older. Eighty-three percent were born in Israel. Almost two-thirds of them are not religious, 10 percent define themselves as religious, and the rest (26 percent) as varying levels of traditional (Ashkenazi, 2016).

When it comes to tourism, the choice of trails is a function of consumer satisfaction, which is thus a main factor in the decision of where to walk, including among tourists. Creating an enjoyable and satisfactory experience is critical in meeting demand levels, since tourists and those looking for leisure activity in nature currently consider known parameters regarding the trails that are open to them. These include the quality of the trail; the attractions and message it contains, such as nostalgia or representation of some tradition; crowd level; and accessibility. The same survey also showed that the average level of satisfaction among INT walkers is high, but is higher regarding the segments in the north and center than in the south, where walking conditions are more difficult and the services available to those on the Trail are less readily available.

The Israeli Walking Tradition

The renewal of the Jewish community in Israel, including the drive to create a "new Jew," led to a strong desire for traveling through the land among members of the *yishuv*. Walking was one of the building blocks of the Israeli civil religion and a main link in the design and solidification of the renewed ties between the Jewish nation in Israel and the territory under its control (Liebman & Don-Yehia, 1983). The dominant institutional-educational concept from the *yishuv* period onward was that walking enables people not only to get to different places, but also to feel the connection with places of national historical importance in its land. Walking was considered an educational tool from scientific, pedagogical, national, and social standpoints, with the relative measure

of each differing as historical circumstances changed and as the dominant group and its educational and political aims changed. Since that time, walking and hiking in Israel have been an educational tool no less than a part of the leisure culture. This was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's message in his speech at the Herzliya Conference in 2010:

> I am talking about educating children about the values connected to our identity and heritage, teaching children to know our people's history, educating young people and adults to deepen our ties to one another and to this place.…Our existence… depends, first and foremost, on the knowledge and national sentiment we as parents bestow on our children, and as a state to its education system. It depends on culture; it depends on our cultural heroes; it depends on our ability to explain the justness of our path and demonstrate our affinity for our land—first to ourselves, and then to others…to connect…people to our homeland through their feet—through becoming familiar with the country, travelling the country. (Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech, 2010)

There are those who depict the history of walking in Israel from the establishment of modern Zionism until the Six Day War with three concentric circles. The innermost circle comprises people from the initial waves of immigration, who walked in order to search for historic roots, mainly to discover places mentioned in the Bible (Berlovitz, 1996). Walking was also intended to help create the "new Jew," which was understood in those years as the opposite of the diaspora Jew. As such, it was supposed to cultivate the desired qualities of the new Jew: courage and daring, physical strength, intimacy with nature, navigation skills, acquaintance with the landscape, and a connection with the land. As historian Anita Shapira said, "Jews never liked climbing Everest or crossing the English Channel, so hiking is the exact opposite of the diaspora Jew. The hiker is the manifestation of the new Jew" (Shapira, quoted by Milner, 1994). Walks and hikes provided a conscious distancing from the religious model of pilgrimage, since those on trails did not have a sanctified specific destination and observed no accepted religious practice. Instead, what guided them was informed thinking about nature and education, very similar to the European thought of that period about walking.

At the core of the walks was scientific-modernist thought, joined by a desire for leisure and a framework for children to be outdoors, and the walks created a cognitive and practical "new map" of the country. Within a short time—though not without struggle—the objectives of the walk were expanded from an educational-scientific or games-pedagogical purpose to a tool for strengthening nationalism, with a connection to the past, the present, and the future (Prawer, 1991, p. 51). At this stage, walks were already intended to "Judaize" the space by identifying Biblical locations and giving Hebrew names to places, plants, and wildlife. The Bible served those on trails as both a title deed and a passport, enriching them also by encounters with new communities established by the pioneers, which highlighted the achievements of the new waves of immigration and further strengthened the connection between the past and the present. Thus more than embodying a geographic theme, the walk was a tool to instill a conceptual, cultivating pride in the achievements of Zionism, socialization, and national indoctrination (Avisar, 2011).

The first generation of sabras (technically, a fruit; the term is used to connote those born in the Land of Israel, who display a prickly exterior and soft interior), children of the first waves of immigrants, created a second circle, in which the thought was already directed toward the establishment of Jewish

sovereignty. In parallel, the influence of the international Scouts movement also garnered strength in Israel. British Scouting, copied in Israel to a considerable extent, offered young people a "youth society" and romanticism: landscapes, camping, and national content. Through activities that instilled knowledge of the land, the formal (schools) and informal (youth movements) education systems strove to implant in young people the ideal that the land could be possessed by repeated visits to its trails. Youth were supposed to "conquer" the land with increased activity that was sometimes risky. Moreover, knowledge of the land became not only a tool for Zionist education of principles and values, but also preparation for service in the Haganah and the Palmah. The Palmah hikes filled quite a few functions: demonstration of a Jewish presence in distant and unsettled areas; knowledge of every corner, path, and trail in the Land of Israel west of the Jordan; survival training, physical challenges, and development of physical fitness; social cohesion; prolonged field exercises; shooting exercises that could occur only in the desert, far from British eyes; and partial imitation of the battlefield. Navigation in the wilderness that had not yet been worn down by previous hikers was, in the eyes of Palmah members, a magical challenge.

At the same time, an intergenerational reaction developed in Israel. Among the first native-born generation, initial signs developed of an erosion of nostalgia for the historical Biblical landscapes. While the Bible was never relegated to a mythical past (Shafran, 2013), here and there the young people began to develop a defiance against its forced takeover of the landscape. As part of that defiance toward the previous generation, the walks and hikes of the first indigenous generation became a new alternative to the pioneering "working the land" of their parents, in both the physical and spiritual sense. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Israeli youth discovered the Judean desert and turned the story of Masada—which for 2000 years of exile had been relegated to the margins of Jewish memory—to the epic of the generation (Zerubavel, 2012). The story focused on the courage of the besieged, their successful resistance of the Romans for three years, and their readiness to fight, and even to die, for their freedom.

The third circle of Israeli walking was formed in the first decade of Israel's independence. The establishment of the state created a sovereign framework with clear borders that limited the potential space for movement but did not reduce the centrality of walking the land. Walks of various degrees of difficulty therefore became a tool for the new country to train its youth, and served the state's two main objectives: settlement along the borders and security. Memorial sites to soldiers who fell defending Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel became trail landmarks. In the 1950s, during Moshe Dayan's term as Chief of Staff, vigorous walks became an important part of the induction ceremonies of new IDF recruits. Following the massive immigration of the 1950s, trail walking also became an important tool in implementing the melting pot concept and in the establishment's attempt to integrate the immigrants. That same period featured the increasing legitimization of individual and small group walks, as opposed to larger groups that until then were the prevalent trend. Almog (1997) holds that the new phenomenon reflected the transition that took place in Israel during those years from rituals serving the needs of the collective, which where therefore done in groups, to individual activities. The Nabatean site of Petra in Jordan was then a type of "Everest" for young Israelis, who were prepared to risk their lives to see the place that was considered part of the relevant Land of Israel, even though it was located east of the Jordan River (Shafran, 2013, p. 473).

As part of encouraging walks with a national character, during the first three decades of the state's existence, many marches were organized in Israel with thousands of participants. The most important ones were three- and four-day

walks that were very popular from the 1950s until the 1970s, particularly annual events that were organized and financed by state bodies. The events took place around the Passover holiday, and thereby "corresponded"—even if not explicitly—with the pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Temple periods. Alongside the timing, which may have also been a function of weather considerations and vacation times, the connection with the traditional pilgrimage was reflected in the fact that on the last day of the event, everyone came to Jerusalem and marched through its streets: students, soldiers, and groups from organizations and factories, as well as large delegations from abroad.

After the Six Day War, the Israeli culture of walking changed. Following the conquest of the Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula, new geographic and cognitive horizons opened up to walking enthusiasts. The general euphoria of victory and the beginnings of a messianic perception that burst forth among parts of Israeli society after the war turned new sites into attractions. Tens of thousands traveled to Jebel Musa, which was now called Mt. Sinai, and to Bedouin communities that were given Hebrew names, such as Dahab, which became Di Zahav, one station in the ancient Jewish nation's travels in the desert following the exodus from Egypt, and Sharm el-Sheikh, which became Ophira. This "Judaization of the landscape" continued the process that took place at the start of the 20th century. At the same time, a change in the youth culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, marked in part by the penetration of Western urban youth culture, lessened interest in walking in Israel, and demanding hikes in particular. The Labor Federation, which was losing its strength, gradually stopped supporting Land of Israel study groups in the local authority workers councils. Moreover, Land of Israel Studies programs were established at the universities then, and the academic approach more than once rejected the popular approach of getting to know the land, and for its own motives turned walking into mainly a pedagogical tool. In those years, the magic and attractiveness of the youth movements also dissipated, and their membership numbers fell drastically. This too led to a reduction in the scope of walks that were organized.

After the Six Day War, the Israeli culture of walking changed. Following the conquest of the Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula, new geographic and cognitive horizons opened up to walking enthusiasts.

These elements that weakened the status of classical Israeli walking were sharpened by the Yom Kippur War, which shocked the Israeli-Jewish collective consciousness and undermined the desire to continue hiking as before. An ambivalent attitude toward the State of Israel and its leaders developed in large and influential sectors of the Israeli-Jewish public, and this was extended to clear Zionist ideas such as knowing the land. In some parts, there was also a marked deterioration in the walking ethos that had developed previously in the country. From the 1970s, and particularly after the Yom Kippur War, backpacking in remote areas became a rite of passage and enabled the voluntary disconnection from home that many young people sought to experience (Avisar, 2011). While it is hard to determine with certainty the extent to which the trauma of the war and the soldiers' protests that followed it, as well as the return of the Sinai, had on the growth of backpacking abroad, these phenomena were close enough in time for us to posit a causal connection.

Yet even then, walking in its national cultural form maintained its structure and content to a large degree, along with its function as a main ideological agent (Yafe-Markowitz, 2011). A wide variety of walks and hikes that include learning about subjects connected to the land—geology, zoology, botany, geography, history,

and archaeology—were offered by many of the public bodies that deal with formal and continuing education, as well as by commercial entities. The IDF continued to invest about one-quarter of its education budget on tours to increase knowledge of the land (Prawer, 1991, p. 2). Private groups, and even families, also often used study materials in preparing for organized walks, or the services of professional guides to help fill the content of the walking experience.

"Israel of the Israel National Trail is a separate country. It is beautiful, quiet, connected to its land and its landscapes, marked by solidarity, with people who are generous and happy to help. It is a very optimistic experience to do the entire Trail. You cross the country and meet only good people."

Although the formal education messages that accompany walks and hikes have not changed dramatically, the tastes and preferences of Israeli walking consumers, and particularly the youth, have shifted profoundly over time. Many schools therefore begun to gradually do away with demanding walks, and have instead adopted what is called "attraction outings," mainly recreational and leisure activities. Although the Ministry of Education prohibits visits to recreational sites, the original walking model has in fact eroded, since there is no demand for it among the students. Moreover, since the 1980s, the organization of school trips has, in many cases, been handed over to commercial entities, despite the clear prohibition of this by the Ministry of Education. As a result, school administrations and public educational entities such as the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel have less influence on the contents of the walks (Avisar, 2011).

The Israel National Trail as a Place of Refuge

Following a review of the development of the Israel National Trail and its two underlying traditions—the global and the domestic Israeli—the Trail as a site must also be considered, since it is far more central from a cognitive and practical perspective than any other trail in Israel.

A "site" is created when people feel that a particular spatial point has significance and is not "just there." A site is defined by a constitutive story—a history—that connects it with those in it or who strive to be among those in it. This is the basis upon which Zali Gurevitch declared that:

> A site is never neutral. It is saturated and weighed down with history and politics, with stories of life. The Israeli site is even more so, since from the outset, it has been organized to a great extent according to opposing sides, wars, struggles, conquests, and histories, not just of the land and its residents, but also of the language, labor, and wilderness. (Gurevitch, 2007, p. 14)

David Michaeli explains the nature of the Israel National Trail as a site as follows:

> The trails were there even beforehand as shepherd's trails, elevation lines, ravines, main roads whose names were changed many times over the generations, water sources, hostels, archaeological sites of ancient cities, ancient communities, new communities, and government systems. Even the directions were there….What wasn't there beforehand was the concept of the entire Trail as an Israeli space. When it was designed, this concept created a new activity space….The Trail creates a new space while also delineating it.…It is a nature reserve of the internal space, whose boundaries shrink along with the trend of compartmentalization, fencing, privatization, and supervision of Israel's external geography that is becoming ever more compressed. (Michaeli, 2008, pp. 31, 33)

This unique nature of the Trail is not hidden from those walking on it, and by way of contrast, it inspires optimism among some who are wont to display acrimony or bitterness. Thus, Raanan Shaked, a journalist whose writings exude existential unease, was "smitten" during his short experience on the Trail with uncharacteristic poeticism: "Israel of the Israel National Trail is a separate country. It is beautiful, quiet, connected to its land and its landscapes, marked by solidarity, with people who are generous and happy to help. It is a very optimistic experience to do the entire Trail. You cross the country and meet only good people" (Shaked, quoted in Bloom, 2015, p. 4). The same is true of his colleague Ronen Bergman, who expounded on what he discovered on the Trail: "The common denominator of love of walking and landscapes among those on trails, the difficulties of nature and the inherent risks that create concern and solidarity—because of all these, the State of Israel, when you look at it from the Israel National Trail, seems like a good and fun place. Much better" (Bergman, 2015, p. 57). It is not just the phenomenon of "good" people, but also a sense of solidarity, something that many believe has been lost in Israeli society, that is ostensibly renewed on the Trail: "On the Trail there is a sense of brotherhood. There is something in the people who walk on the Trail that is absent in others. The love of Israel, perhaps" (Y. Diskin, personal interview, January 22, 2015).

A young hiker, already disillusioned with life in Israel, said:

> In view of my disappointment and disillusionment with the state and its politics, the Israel National Trail was an opportunity for me to reignite my faith in Israelis….Through the Trail, I learned to love the land, to find good people, and to see the unique landscapes. It's a little like going abroad and disconnecting from the day-to-day pressure, but without leaving the country. (Guttman, 2011)

The place is also considered a habitat for "good" Israelis:

> Trail walkers are those who believe in our country, in our land.…Unlike other walkers, they don't litter. The Trail walker builds his route and dreams about it, and builds on it, and takes this period in his life. It's not just, "Let's go, I am leaving." It's as if the Trail is yours. You have taken ownership of it. I came to the Trail, I thought about it, I dreamed about it, I will not ruin it for myself or those who come after me. (D. Perl, personal interview, November 2, 2014)

Cleanliness is often discussed in the context of the Trail, as one of the features that set it apart from the rest of the country. Journalist Ben-Dror Yemini:

> On the day we walked there, there were a great many people on the Trail. It was not clear whether the Israelis had changed, but it was clear that the route was devoid of all litter. There were no candy wrappers, no disposable cups, no empty cans, or plastic bottles. There are beautiful Israelis, and if they only want it, they also have a beautiful land. (Yemini, 2015, p. 20)

Penina Shore, founder of the Ziknei Hakfar band and organizer of the "On the Israel National Trail—Diary of a Trek" musical and whose home is right next to the Trail, echoes this sense: "There is no litter on the Israel National Trail. There is something that commands anyone who enters this path to behave accordingly. The people who walk the Trail are better than others in the country. Even more so than other

trails…Good people bring each other. Above all else, there is quality" (P. Shore, personal interview, October 30, 2014).

The most common sentiment to emerge from materials written about the Trail and interviews conducted for this study is the somewhat nostalgic love for the land or the homeland, generally against the background of disillusionment with the prevailing reality.

The most common sentiment to emerge from materials written about the Trail and interviews conducted for this study is the somewhat nostalgic love for the land or the homeland, generally against the background of disillusionment with the prevailing reality. Through the walk as a secular ceremony, Trail walkers choose to be tourists in their own land with a desire to get to know the land and its landscapes, and to deepen their connection with it (Twitto, 2010). Kliot and Collins-Kreiner suggest that while walkers and hikers around the world largely share universal characteristics that include physical, athletic, and spiritual elements of personal competition, in Israel, local-particular motives of "partnership," love of the land, and ideology are especially prominent. A study they conducted shows that 90 percent said that walking the Trail allows them to identify with the Land of Israel and strengthens their connection with Israel. Just 10 percent attributed a low level of importance to this motive (Ashkenazi, 2016). The Trail as a site therefore provides a reference framework for the story of the path: "It provides a reason to go" (Halfon, 2008, p. 130). With that, walking also leaves room for a personal interpretation of the collective ethos:

> The person searching for his way on the Israel National Trail for his own purposes, in the name of adventure, in the name of crisis, in the name of life, and so forth, carries a message and a concept together with his backpack, and together with his steps he realizes the Israeli space. The walker on the Trail is an ambassador representing a living, commercial, cultural, political, complex, and functioning system of his time. And at the same time, he is an ambassador of himself, an observing artist that is removed from the existing order as a pilgrim…The system enables a permitted extra-territorial space to a certain degree. (Michaeli, 2008, p. 31)

Among older people as well, there are endless examples of the drive to connect with the land reflected in their walking on the Trail: "There is no doubt that the Israel National Trail, even if it is not in the premier league of global trails, even if others are longer, higher, and more mythological, is unequaled in engrossing you and leading you to such a long history" (Halfon, 2008, p. 26). And: "The more than we walked and went deeper into our small trek between the trees of the Carmel Forest, the more calm there was. We were struck by the simple joy of someone who returned to his place and whose breath is filled with the ancient scent" (Sarna, 2015, p. 30).

As such, the Trail exposes a very interesting phenomenon regarding the consciousness of the Israeli public, or at least of those walking on it. In contrast to the high level of public criticism of institutional entities and the messages coming "from above," in the hearts of those walking there also beats patriotism free of irony. For instance, contrary to the Zionism that is typical of her approach to other subjects, psychologist and journalist Varda Rasiel Jackont shows a lot of softness and conformity in her attitude to the fallen and their monuments. In an article, she connects the subject and walking on the Trail with national-personal history:

> There are many monuments included in this segment of the Israel National Trail, which stretches from the Rosh

> Ha'ayin area until the Burma Road. These monuments, commemorating soldiers who fell in the War of Independence, bring me back to one of the formative experiences of my childhood. I remember the day when Arab countries attacked the *yishuv*. I was a seven-year-old girl, and because of the gunfire that came from Jaffa, I was afraid to go close to my father's carpentry shop that was near Herzl Street. (Rasiel Jackont, 2015, p. 54)

The need for the Trail as a connecting link, in view of the weakening of the sense of solidarity in Israeli society, is reflected well in the following passage:

> To a certain extent, the Trail was a trek in pursuit of the individual. Even the many meetings that we held along the way flowed in this direction, in many cases unintentionally. In this era, in which there are many who tend to vilify common action, this group provided evidence of the fact that such action increases and empowers the personal experience, beyond its being a tool for doing things that none of us could do alone…The small fire that burned in the hearts of each of us consolidated into a large flame that lit the way for us from Eilat to Dan. (*Something that will remain…Passage on "the Trail": A Group Journey Book*)

In conclusion, for many among the mainstream of the Israeli-Jewish public, the Israel National Trail serves as a place of refuge from all that truly, or ostensibly, was once good and has since "broken" in the country and in society. In this place—whose "bubble-like" nature most visitors don't burst, or they ignore—"everything is great." The landscape is pleasing to the eye; the air is clear; the people are good; the garbage doesn't pile up; politicians are nowhere to be found; the social gaps are erased; and all the concerns of the day are as if they didn't exist. Walking on the Trail constitutes an adventure to a mostly imaginary and harmonious past, pure in an ideological and social sense, as well as a mostly unconscious step to escapism from the annoyance, pain, and inconvenience of the present. The inability or lack of desire to deal with the fundamental, existential collective problems, and the choice to escape, even if only temporarily, are reflected not only in walking the Trail. There is a similar distraction involved in increased brand-name consumerism, frequent travel abroad in order to "charge one's batteries," the high rate of people watching reality shows on television, worship of physical fitness, the extreme investment in the food and wine culture, and more.

For many among the mainstream of the Israeli-Jewish public, the Israel National Trail serves as a place of refuge from all that truly, or ostensibly, was once good and has since "broken" in the country and in society.

In this sense as well, the Israel of today is no different than many other societies in the world, which also do not rush to deal with their underlying problems that become more complex with each passing year. In turn, this phenomenon leads many to expand the definition of national security to areas that in the past were not included. There are many reasons for this zeitgeist, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis currently gripping the world, and this is not the place to delve more deeply into them (see, for instance, Kissinger, 2020; Fischer, 2020; and Meyer-Resende, 2020[6]). However, two of those reasons are particularly prominent in the Israeli case of recent years: the lack of national leadership to advance an agreed-upon vision of the future that is convincing and exciting, and the prevailing view that the problems on the national agenda are so difficult that they defy resolution. "The

Israel National Trail is perhaps the only place in the country to which we can truly escape. To get out of your life and to start walking, more and more, until you reach a place—not necessarily physical—where you can stop. A logical country must have such an outlet, for those who need it, who are lost, who are searching, who are leaving. For us" (Shaked, 2015, p. 34).

There is perhaps nothing better than ending with lines from David Grossman, who immortalized the Israel National Trail in his seminal book *To the End of the Land*: "And the land is beautiful, with all its scars and all its bitter memories, and its endless memorial monuments. It is beautiful and bountiful, and contains so much consolation, in the moments when it allows you to forget the evils and the ills that have infected it, and in the places where it is landscape and open space, and open hearts" (Grossman, 2008, translated from the Hebrew).

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Notes

1 The name "Israel Trail"—its official name in English is the "Israel National Trail"—and the route's markings are official trademarks currently held by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. This is not just a formal matter, since lawsuits have been filed against commercial entities that have used the name without permission (for instance, a walking equipment store at the Dvira Junction and a store at the Koah Junction), in order to force them to change their names.

2 The word "Israel" was replaced with "land" in the Arabic name of the trail in an effort to encourage an attachment to it among Israel's Arab citizens, even if the term "Israel" is difficult for them. However, this effort was unsuccessful, and the Arab public is largely disconnected from the Trail enterprise.

3 1,000 kilometers is not a precise figure, since the exact number of kilometers of the entire trail shifts, based on changes that have been made to the route over the years or are still underway.

4 In practice, part of the problem of proximity to Arab localities was "solved" when the Trail was shifted westward toward the sea, due to security concerns during the second intifada. The revised route, which was not changed back even after life returned to its former routine, includes the outskirts of the cities of Netanya and Herzliya, and the entrances to Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, and Arad, giving those on the Trail some exposure to Israel's urban landscape. In addition, some of the problems previously affecting supplies and equipment for the trek were solved due to the proximity to cities.

5 The Golan Trail was created in subsequent years. It is connected to the INT, but is not an integral part of it.

6 These three articles, which are a drop in the sea of publications regarding the expected outcomes of the Covid-19 crisis, directly address changes demanded in the definition of the national interest, and thus national security, so that it includes elements that were considered "soft" but now prove to have an immense potential impact. These elements include, for instance, the tension between the tendency to withdraw internally during a national tragedy and the need to cooperate to find solutions to global challenges, such as future pandemics and collapsing economic markets.

Call for Papers for *Strategic Assessment*

The editorial board of the INSS journal *Strategic Assessment* invites authors to submit articles to be published in the journal's updated format. Proposals for special themed issues are also welcome.

Strategic Assessment, a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on national security, cyber, and intelligence, was launched in 1998 and is published quarterly in Hebrew and English by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University. *Strategic Assessment* serves as a platform for original research on a spectrum of issues relating to the discipline of national security, cyber, and intelligence. The purpose of the journal is to spark and enhance an informed, constructive debate of fundamental questions in national security studies, using an approach that integrates a theoretical dimension with policy-oriented research. Articles on topics relating to Israel, the Middle East, the international arena, and global trends are published with the goal of enriching and challenging the national security knowledge base.

The current era has seen many changes in fundamental conventions relating to national security and how it is perceived at various levels. As national security research evolves, it seeks to adjust to new paradigms and to innovations in the facets involved, be they technological, political, cultural, military, or socio-economic. Moreover, the challenge of fully grasping reality has become even more acute with the regular emergence of competing narratives, and this is precisely why factual and data-based research studies are essential to revised and relevant assessments.

The editorial board encourages researchers to submit articles that have not been previously published that propose an original and innovative thesis on national security with a broad disciplinary approach rooted in international relations, political science, history, economics, law, communications, geography and environmental studies, Israel studies, Middle East and Islamic studies, sociology and anthropology, strategy and security studies, technology, cyber, conflict resolution, or additional disciplines.

In the spirit of the times, *Strategic Assessment* is shifting its center of gravity to an online presence and availability. While INSS will continue to prepare issues on a quarterly basis, articles approved for publication, following the review and editing process, will be published in an online version on the journal's website in the format of "published first online," and subsequently included in the particular quarterly issues.

Strategic Assessment publishes articles in five categories:

Research Forum – academic articles of a theoretical and research nature on a wide range of topics related to national security, of up to 7000 words in Hebrew or 9000 words in English (with APA-style documentation). Articles should be researched-based and include a theoretical perspective, and address a range of subjects related to national security. All articles are submitted for double blind peer review. Submissions must include an abstract of 100-120 words; keywords (no more than ten); and a short author biography.

Policy Analysis – articles of 1500-2000 in Hebrew words and up to 2500 words in English that analyze policies in national security contexts. These articles will be without footnotes and bibliography and use hyperlinks to refer to sources, as necessary. Recommended reading and additional source material can be included. Submissions must include an abstract of 100-120 words; keywords (no more than ten); and a short author biography.

Professional Forum – panel discussions on a particular topic, or in-depth interview, of 2000-3000 words (up to 3500 words in English) including source material (APA-style). Submissions must include a short author biography.

Academic Survey – a survey of 1800-2500 words (up to 3000 words in English) including references and recommended reading (APA-style) of the latest professional literature on a specific topic relating to national security. Submissions must include a short author biography.

Book Reviews – book reviews of 800-1300 words (up to 1500 words in English) including source material (APA-style) on a wide range of books relating to national security. Submissions must include a short author biography.

Articles should be submitted electronically to editors-sa@inss.org.il and indicate the category of the attached article. You may also use this e-mail address for questions or additional information about the journal.

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