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Israel's National Objectives: A Comprehensive Perspective

Dan Schueftan

Israel's unique characteristics call for an exceptionally broad perspective in the discussion of its national objectives. Israel's national objectives can be grouped into ten categories that incorporate the historic objectives of the Zionist movement and the strategic needs of the state that it established. The preconditions for realizing all the national objectives have already attained a critical mass. Today, a strong and self-confident country can deal with the main challenges, taking far less existential risk than it did at its outset. However, it is that very strength that presents a wide variety of options, and it is far from simple to make the choice.

Israel's unique characteristics call for an exceptionally broad perspective in the discussion of its national objectives. Unlike most nation-states, the contemporary Jewish state was not established as a sovereign expression of a functioning national community in a defined geographic area based on common experience, but rather, by a revolutionary

movement that strove to build—primarily on the basis of millennia of historical consciousness and memory—a modern entity almost from scratch. A movement seeking to transform the realities of a people cannot be content with the development and maintenance of existing patterns; its national objectives must be examined and defined through much more

stringent criteria. The challenge is magnified and complicated when an exceptional regional belligerence and an international environment that ranges between skepticism, criticism, and hostility join the greater picture. When all of these are heightened by the special challenges of living on the seam between divergent political cultures of East and West, the mission clearly requires a very different, distinctively complex discussion.

Israel's national objectives can be grouped into ten categories that incorporate the historic objectives of the Zionist movement and the strategic needs of the state that it established. This is not a wish list of desired ideals, but an attempt to outline a "post factum strategy" based on the internal logic that has long shaped major national decisions.

Return of the Jewish People to History as a Functioning Nation

At the outset of the modern age, the Jews did not function as a people. The attachment to Jewish history and to the Land of Israel and the resulting ethos were more in the realm of potential, and the question of their realization was in doubt until the last generation. The two main components of the nation in Israel—the Jews of Europe and the Jews from Muslim lands—essentially developed separately. Zionism's revolutionary mission was to reestablish a framework of common and functioning solidarity among the Jewish people for those who wished to reestablish a national life in their ancestral homeland.

With the establishment of the state and following the mass immigration, a kind of conglomerate was formed in Israel. The tension in the friction-saturated encounter, mainly between those from Western and Oriental origins, threatened to tear Israeli society apart along ethnic fault lines. This tension gradually dissipated to an extent that allowed for a dramatic increase in inter-ethnic marriages, which in turn pushed this volatile issue to the margins of the national scene toward

eventual dissolution. This process reached a critical mass at the end of the last century and became the mainstream political and social reality, reflecting the sovereign responsibility of a self-reliant people, thereby returning the Jewish nation to history as a functioning people. The solidarity and responsibility do not fully encompass the hard core of the growing ultra-Orthodox population, and certainly not most of the large Arab minority.

Concentration of the Majority of the Jewish People in its Sovereign Homeland

At its outset, the Zionist movement only comprised a small minority of the Jewish people. The revolutionary nature of the idea, the opposition of the rabbinic leadership, and the very difficult physical conditions in the land contributed to what was initially a small number of immigrants.

For many years, it was doubtful whether those who chose to resettle in the Land of Israel would become the center of Jewish national life. It was only in the last generation that the demographic dynamic gained the critical mass to ensure the eventual concentration of the vast majority of the Jewish people in the Jewish state. The large waves of immigration of Holocaust survivors in Europe and refugees from Muslim countries and the immigrants from the former Soviet Union, along with the dwindling of the large Jewish communities in Europe and Latin America, created the foundation. But only dramatic demographic trends in the two remaining large Jewish communities—in Israel and in the United States—ensured the concentration of most of the Jewish people in Israel: Israel has a high birth rate and negligible assimilation, while in the United States, natural increase is much lower and assimilation is very common. Currently, about half of the Jewish people worldwide lives in Israel. In the next decade, it is expected to become a clear majority.

The concentration of most of the Jewish people in its homeland places much more responsibility for its historic destiny on the leadership and society in Israel. When “most of the eggs” of the nation’s assets are lumped together “in one basket” located in a threatened state, a special effort is needed to build a state and society that the Jewish people will want to live in with a large and stable Jewish majority that carefully avoids both complacency and adventurism.

Pluralism and Open Society

A state that does not maintain and steadily cultivate a pluralistic and open social and political environment will transgress the tradition of Jewish communal life in the modern age; disappoint the constructive segment of the population that ensures its security, well-being, and prosperity; will not attract Jews from developed and democratic countries; and in the end will endanger its very existence in the surrounding hostile environment.

The open society and democratic regime in Israel are a dramatic achievement in view of the origins of the population and the circumstances of Israeli existence. The vast majority of Israel’s citizens experienced mainly authoritative regimes and patriarchal societies in their countries of origin, even when there were more open structures within their own Jewish communities. The Jewish *yishuv* in the Mandate period and the State of Israel were exposed for more than one hundred years to threats of existential dimensions, and lived in a constant state of emergency. Despite temporary difficulties and setbacks, Israel has succeeded in ensuring at every decade a more open and pluralistic social and political reality than in the previous one. In the Arab and ultra-Orthodox sectors, these standards are not generally maintained. Among the ultra-Orthodox, institutional subservience is common, with an emphasis on personal status issues, to an establishment that is mostly fossilized, radicalizing, and partially corrupt.

The main challenge to the open nature of Israel is the ultra-Orthodox sector, due to a combination of its standing in the political system, its massive natural growth, its separate educational institutions, its internal political compliance, and the impact of the values of its leadership that negate pluralism, tolerance, and openness on the traditional, mostly Oriental, population. Despite the willingness of a minority

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on the edges of this sector to integrate into the general society and adopt values of greater openness, its massive natural growth ensures that those who adhere to the values of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinic leadership will rapidly grow as a share of the population.

Security and Deterrence in a Hostile Regional Environment

Israel lives in the heart of a failed, unstable, and violent Arab region, alongside two regional powers—Iran and Turkey: the former is spearheading processes of regional radicalization, while the latter is sliding in that direction. Since its establishment as a state, Israel has confronted a violent attempt to uproot it, resting on a deep, sometimes pathological belligerence that is pervasive in Arab public opinion, even in the countries that have signed peace treaties with Israel. This hostility is handed down from generation to generation in the formal and informal education systems.

Israel must offer a credible response to active Arab belligerency not only to thwart the immediate threats. It must also present

steadfast and perpetual deterrence against its enemies, while offering its own residents dependable and effective defense at a tolerable price. Deterrence is focused on the enemy's recognition that Israel has the power, the determination, and the freedom of action to inflict unacceptable damage. It is intended to distance belligerent actions one from another and temper them in a way that will enable Israel to realize the constructive objectives that are the essence of Israel's *raison d'être*, during the relatively relaxed periods between the violent high-intensity outbreaks. The trust of its residents is necessary to reinforce national resilience, which is indispensable for Israel.

The critical anchor of Israel's position on the regional and international scene is its relationship with the United States. That relationship is based on a common ethos as well as on largely overlapping strategic interests. Contrary to its European parallel, the American ethos grants legitimacy, when necessary, to the use of decisive power, even without international consent.

In seven decades of independence, Israel managed to maintain its security and wellbeing through a combination of a strong military, determination to use power when it is called for, political freedom of action, and regional political settlements that have shortened the lines of potential confrontation and created strategic partnerships. Arab states are deterred from war, and some even cooperate with Israel. The dangerous confrontation with Iran is, for now, conducted under relatively comfortable terms, even though Israel is gradually realizing that the capability gap in its favor may narrow, as it faces a sophisticated and determined enemy that relies on its impressive society and a zealous leadership. This enemy has wisely avoided direct confrontation, and is focused on its effort to establish regional hegemony backed by a drive toward a nuclear arsenal and an immense array of missiles.

Continued Steadfastness in an Unfriendly International Environment

Other than the crucially important exception of the strategic partnership with the United States and a series of good bilateral relations with other countries, Israel lives in an unfriendly international environment. The situation in international organizations is very bad and growing worse, with a massive majority of nations pursuing a blatant, often absurd and preposterous anti-Israel policy in the UN and other bodies.

Outside the international organizations, Israel's situation is, on the whole, good and improving. The international recognition of its strength, its capabilities, and its importance is robust and getting stronger; its innovation and achievements are highly appreciated. Its standing in the United States is solid, despite significant erosion among "progressive" circles. Bilateral relations with European countries are generally good, even when unfair criticism is voiced publicly, particularly by the European Union. Relations with the countries in the east and southeast of the continent (Greece and Cyprus) are good and improving. There is lately an increasing willingness in Europe to learn from Israel, particularly from its experience in the struggle against terrorism and the integration of migrants, and even to show greater understanding of its security concerns. In China, Russia, India, and Brazil, Israel is considered an actor of a weight and significance dramatically disproportionate to its size.

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decisive, democratic state that is always pro-American. It behaves as “Sparta” toward its enemies and “Athens” internally, and shares a strategic interest with the United States in the struggle against radical actors that threaten them both. Israel is unique in its insistence on self-reliance in its defense, unlike all other allies insisting on a major contribution of American troops. This combination of ethos, overlapping strategic interests, and self-reliance explains the widespread American public support for Israel over generations. This support restricted unfriendly administrations in applying pressure on Israel, while the effective pro-Israel lobby in Washington contributed outstanding salespeople to the marketing of an excellent strategic product.

All of this must be maintained and deepened. The foundations of this support may be deeply rattled if Israel's image as sharing the values of the American mainstream erodes, or if it is viewed as manipulating the US into a war with Iran against the wishes of the American people. If Israel does not work diligently to maintain reasonable relations with most European countries, despite their biases and exasperating voting patterns in international organizations, Israel's export economy, which is geared mainly toward Europe, will suffer, as will essential scientific relations. If Israel does not take advantage of the strategic opportunities opening in Asia (mainly in India and Japan), it will not gain a place in the emerging markets of the future.

Maintaining Historical Jewish Creativity

In the early days of the Jewish *yishuv* and the state, there was concern that the creativity that had characterized the Jews during their exile would be lost under the new conditions of Jewish sovereignty. Apparently, the yield of cultural and intellectual creation in Israel has proven that this concern was, at least, grossly exaggerated. In the fields of science and technology, Israel is universally perceived as an

international hub of creativity and innovation. This should be bolstered further and cultivated, not just because it is extremely beneficial, but also because it reflects and upholds traditions that have characterized Jews for millennia.

The freedom of creative thought and expression in the Israeli mainstream is challenged from the margins: the religious-right and the “progressive”-left. The ultra-Orthodox and the militants in the national religious sector are increasingly adopting rigid practices and strive to impose them by means of their political power and separate educational systems. In the “progressive” wing, the freedoms of creative thought and expression are in danger, purportedly in defense of diversity and pluralism, through the “thought police” of political correctness. The risk from those margins comes from the demographic surge of the ultra-Orthodox and national religious right, and from the disproportional weight of the purists among the cultural and academic elite.

Combining “Sparta” toward Enemies with “Athens” Within

Facing extreme external threats on the one hand, and cognizant of the essential requisite of maintaining the values of an open and pluralistic society on the other, Israel must carefully examine the complex balance between their conflicting requirements. For the purposes of deterrence, it must project an image of a society that can act like “Sparta” when it is threatened. Toward its own citizens and friends, it must show the openness and flexibility of “Athens” whenever possible. “Sparta” when necessary, to ensure life itself; “Athens” when possible, to make life positively meaningful to civilized people. Israel has little to learn from the experience of other open and pluralistic societies, since none have dealt with the dilemmas of a struggle of existential proportions, generation after generation for over a century.

The sense of security among mainstream Israelis is the decisive factor in the society's

willingness to take major risks. The gradual liberalization was, to a large extent, a product of the transition from the sense of fragility in the early years of the Jewish state, through the sense of security following the 1956 Sinai Campaign and the sense of “normalcy” of the 1960s. It grew stronger with the perception of Israeli power following the Six Day War and even more so, despite the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, after the peace agreement with

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Combining Individualism with “Tribal” and National Solidarity

The resilience of the society and the sense of home that keeps the vast majority of the constructive elements in Israel are a product of a combination between a modern, dynamic, and individualistic society with the warmth of family and solidarity of most of the Jewish “tribe.” Popular clichés about a “split society” do not distinguish between fierce disputes (mostly constructive), and a deep and functioning solidarity among the non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish core and whoever chooses to join this circle. The hard core of the ultra-Orthodox shares only some of this solidarity, and the Arab population shares none of its core.

What Israelis say about themselves in public opinion surveys that place Israel in the top tenth percent of the “happiness index” alongside relaxed, wealthy, and homogeneous countries is reflected in two crucially important issues: the number of children per family, and their attitude toward military service. Israel is apparently the only country in the Western world where it is common for educated and well-to-do families to raise close to three children per family—twice the average in Europe and about one-third more than in the United States. This practice is not associated with the kind of pressure on the individual to conform to primordial loyalties exerted by the extended family, so common in traditional cultures that often suppress liberties and pluralism. Israel is also the only democratic country that has conscription to its armed forces for men and women, where the military is consistently involved in wars and violent confrontations at all levels. Most mainstream Israelis not only enlist willingly; they view their military service as a formative and positive experience.

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Egypt. This self-confidence also explains why the continued control over a belligerent population of millions, major terrorism in Israel’s civilian population centers, and the murder of more than a thousand people during the “second intifada” did not lead to the adoption of a lifestyle of hard oppression that spills over into Israeli society. Rather, the democratic and pluralistic imperative was strong enough to deflect the damages of the perpetual confrontation, despite the continued emergency situation, four major wars, countless large and small military operations, and thousands of missiles on the home front. The sense of security enabled the tightening of the value restrictions on the means the Israeli society accepted as permissible for the security forces to employ in its name to ensure its main existential and deterrent needs.

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Alongside the recognition of the importance of creativity, freedom of thought, individualism, daring, a touch of constructive aggressiveness, rebelliousness, and *hutzpah*, there is broad national consensus in the mainstream on fundamental issues. Despite lively and even rending arguments in the political sphere, society can function through solidarity toward realizing common objectives. In the most recent three election campaigns, issues of security, society, and economy were only perfunctorily mentioned against the backdrop of broad agreement on the principles, while the discussion focused mainly on personal issues and the struggle over positions of power.

Prosperity and Quality of Life

The importance of prosperity based on integration in the global economy, and quality of life based on the rule of law and tolerance and on well-functioning education, healthcare, and welfare systems is almost a self-evident national objective. It is particularly necessary in a country under threat that is forced to devote a share of its GDP to defense that is four or five times that of most democratic countries and needs to mobilize most of its population for a perpetual struggle. Everyone agrees that without far-reaching progress in all these, Israel would not have survived in the past, and without constantly cultivating them it will not be able to withstand the future. The main impediment to Israel's economic prosperity is the pervasive culture among large parts of the ultra-Orthodox and Muslim populations. Israel has a variety of other problems, chiefly low labor productivity and an unjustifiably high cost of living, but the structural element concerns these sectors.

The country has an interest in integrating the ultra-Orthodox population into the modern economy and strengthening this sector, but this sector's leadership has enough political power to foil this effort. The positive phenomena of integration in this community are losing a significant portion of their contribution in face of the volume of ultra-Orthodox natural growth.

In the Muslim population, the main socio-economic obstacles are a low rate of female participation in the labor force, a traditional way of life resting on the clan structure, pluralism deficiency, and a high level of crime and violence. These characteristics have failed most Arab societies in the region in meeting the challenges of the 21st century. In both sectors, there is also a major problem concerning the rule of law.

Recently a concerted effect in the proper direction has been underway in the Arab sector, offering preference to Arab local government and massive investment to promote the integration of Arab society in the country's economy, chiefly by Government Decision number 922 of December 2015 to transfer NIS 13.5 billion over five years to advance minority population groups. Despite positive trends in Arab society concerning the education of women and a lower birth rate, expectations of a dramatic turnaround in the near future should be contained.

Maintaining the Constructivist Ethos

The impressive success of the Zionist enterprise and the State of Israel in critically important domains should be largely attributed to their constructivist imperative. This means placing nation and society building at the top of the national priority list, at the expense of maximizing national rights, at the expense of short term promotion of the economic well-being of the population, and even at the expense of important defense requirements. The Zionist enterprise is intended to redeem the people, and the redemption of the Land of Israel is subservient to that supreme objective. That is what dictated the restrictions of Zionist settlement during the Mandate period, the extent of Israel's conquests toward the end of the War of Independence, the withdrawal from Sinai in exchange for the peace treaty with Egypt, the disengagement from Gaza, the absorption of mass immigration, and Israel's restraint in the face of international pressures.

With the perspective of more than a century, one can appreciate the magnitude of Israel's achievement in adopting these priorities and express concern about the future. This relates to the impasse on a very decisive issue—undesirable control over millions of Palestinians—that has been a burden in this context on the Zionist enterprise over the past half-century. This is not about the “solution to the Palestinian question” or “peace,” but about the cost of control of the Palestinians at the expense of investing most of Israel's national resources into the Israeli society.

The only response to this combination of the absence of agreed solution and the unviability of the existing situation is a strategy of unilateralism. This means unilaterally determining the border to encompass a strategic belt and the settlement blocs that are home to 80 percent of the settlers, evacuating those outside of these blocs—either voluntarily or by force—and resettling them in the Galilee, the Negev, the Golan, or the blocs.

Regarding this national objective, unlike the other nine discussed here, it is not enough to strengthen existing trends and to correct secondary errors. Needed here is a national strategy based on the mainstream's willingness for a historic compromise, even painful, disappointing, and unsatisfactory in terms of the sense of justice or the self-assurance concerning Israel's strength. This strategy must accept with serenity that at this stage there is no realistic agreed-upon solution, mainly because the Palestinian national movement has become addicted to its concept of justice and its narrative of victimhood. It systematically foils any attempt at compromise and demonstrates by its persistent conduct its unwillingness to take responsibility for a sovereign state and opt for a constructive national building effort.

The existing situation distorts the Zionist priorities of Israel, since it devotes a significant share of its political, economic, and military

resources to the Palestinian issue, and because Israel is perceived, in the eyes of its own citizens, as responsible for the destiny of the Palestinians living in the West Bank. Israel faces a dramatic upsurge in the risk to its constructivist orientation. Direct control for generations raises the concern of political integration that will eventually ruin the Jewish democratic state from within. Such an integrated state will not have the resources for long to maintain its constructive calling, without which Israel has no future.

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Conclusion

The preconditions for realizing all of the national objectives—the coalescence of a functioning people, the establishment of a strong territorial base, and the rejuvenation of the national language—have already attained a critical mass. It is important to expand the circle of solidarity to include the hard core of the ultra-Orthodox population and it is desirable to include most of the Arab population in an appropriate civil framework, but the core exists, strong and irreversibly secure, even if these are achieved only gradually and partially. The concentration of the majority of the Jewish people in its historic homeland has succeeded beyond any realistic expectations, and the direction of the demographic processes ensuring the fortification of this achievement seems stable. The pluralistic characteristics and the democratic regime are robust. They are

challenged primarily from two directions: one is the perpetual emergency and war, chief among them the control over millions of Palestinians, and the second is the ongoing attempt by religious circles to exert their authority over more sectors and walks of life. Both are currently under control, but a keen awareness of their danger, and close and constant monitoring are required so that they do not spiral out of control in the future.

Israel's situation is complex. It is under greater threat than any other democratic country, and for generations has been dealing with challenges with existential dimensions; almost certainly it will continue to confront these challenges for generations in the future. From the outset the national objectives of the Zionist enterprise and the Jewish state were to re-establish a people in its historic homeland. They are now to fortify it, increase its well-being, and realize the constructivist needs of the Jewish people and all its citizens who are actively willing to participate in building and defending the Jewish and democratic state.

The challenges today may be much more complex than those that required a response three or four generations ago, but the response itself is far less difficult to realize. In the past, it was much easier to decide what to do, since the options at the outset were so few. But because of Israel's weakness at that time, it was very hard to do what was necessary. Today, a strong and self-confident country can deal with the main challenges, taking far less existential risk than it did at its outset. However, it is that very strength that presents it with a wide variety of options, and it is far from simple to make the choice. In other words, Israel suffers from "problems of the wealthy": many assets with dilemmas concerning how best to invest them.

Dr. Dan Schueftan is the head of the International Graduate Program in National Security at the University of Haifa. This article is a condensed version of a forthcoming documented and more detailed work.