



Time for an Orderly Process to Update Israel's National Security Strategy

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Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change

by David (Chuck) Freilich

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The lack of a contemporary national security concept in Israel has long been criticized by figures in the security establishment, academia, and politics. Chuck Freilich's book *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change* is an extraordinary enterprise in its scope, and is an important milestone toward realizing the vision of a regulated process to update the national security concept, which has not received an official seal since the days of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, and has since been something of an "Oral Law." Any engagement in Israel's national security concept is more relevant today than ever in the face of the internal challenges following the coronavirus pandemic; these challenges substantiate the claim that a socio-economic strategy must be part of any national security concept, which cannot be relegated to the security-political field alone. Freilich insists

on the need to update the concept periodically. From my knowledge of the situation in Israel, a change in this direction will be achieved only if the political echelon is mobilized to help the National Security Staff lead the process in cooperation with all relevant elements (the security establishment, headed by the IDF, and government ministries), as stipulated in the National Security Council Law (2008).

Freilich's book is a comprehensive and wide-ranging work that presents the development of Israel's national security concept and its evolution over the years, with an emphasis on the period that began in the 1990s to the present day. During this period, there were profound changes in Israel's strategic environment, which demanded and still require the adjustment of Israel's security concept and response. The book is a must-read for anyone dealing with this subject, both in the establishment and in academia, and it serves as a good basis for understanding this complex issue and for monitoring its development.

This book differs from other books written so far on the subject, both in its historical survey of engagement in the national security concept and in its perspective, which encompasses all aspects related to national security: security, political, economic, and societal. As a former member of the security establishment and as former deputy chief of the National Security Council, Freilich also calls on his personal experience. He succeeds in meeting the goal he set for his book—to present a comprehensive examination of Israel's national security concept, to bridge the existing gap in the literature on the subject, and to contribute to the analysis and enrichment of Israeli thinking on national security issues (p. 27).

The book comprises four parts. The first part includes an introduction with an overview of the history of work on the national security concept, and presents in detail the classical security doctrine as formulated in the 1950s by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion; its evolution the first decades after

the establishment of the state; and its serving as the basis of Israeli strategic thinking until the 1980s. This concept was built on three legs: deterrence; warning, and decision, along with a number of basic principles, led by emphasis on the quality of the army versus the quantity of enemies; adoption of a defensive strategy carried out in an offensive manner (transferring combat to enemy territory, preventive strikes, tough defense, short wars); alliances with world powers alongside strategic independence and self-reliance; striving for peace; nation building; and socio-economic development.

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In the second part, Freilich presents the changes in Israel's strategic environment in recent decades, detailing the change in military threats over the years: in the conventional realm (asymmetric threats, and especially the threat of missiles to the home front and terrorism); in the unconventional realm (Iran's nuclear effort); and in the cyber field. It also surveys the changes that have taken place in non-military threats at the political level (changes in the relations between the regional states and involvement of world powers; diplomatic warfare against Israel: boycott and delegitimization), and in the socio-economic sphere (the demographic threat; internal division; social resilience and its implications for the IDF and decision making processes).

The third part is devoted to Israel's strategic response and includes a detailed analysis of the military response, based on the classical security concept and its development over the years. It emphasizes the changes that have taken place in the actual response, while adapting and adopting new response components without anchoring this in an orderly doctrine: in the

conventional realm (multi-layer missile defense system; the campaign between wars; fences in face of border threats); in the unconventional realm (nuclear ambiguity policy; thwarting and preventing proliferation; defensive measures); and in the face of challenges in the cyber realm. The response is analyzed in the field of foreign policy, with a detailed presentation of Israel's foreign relations and a special, in-depth chapter on relations and dilemmas vis-à-vis the United States.

The fourth and most important part is a summary of Freilich's conclusions and recommendations, which present his thesis regarding an updated national security concept that he formulated in his research and proposes as a basis for systematic, public, academic, and governmental debate. The formulated concept includes a set of principles intended to serve as guidelines for planning and making future decisions on national security issues, but it is not a prescription or a recipe for a detailed policy. He also explains that in issues with political sensitivity such as the future of the West Bank and demographic issues, it is his subjective position. The main message of the concept proposed in the book is: Israel has never been more secure or in a better position to outline its national future, so it can adopt a long-term approach based on strategic patience and a greater emphasis on diplomacy and defense (p. 367).

The main policy recommendations are:

- a. *In the political sphere*, separation from the Palestinians is a top priority, as is the promotion of a new comprehensive foreign policy. Relations with the United States should be defined as a fundamental pillar of national security, and alongside adaptation to dependence on America, as the author's recommendation is to sign a defense pact with the United States, to strive for independence when possible (pp. 386-387).
- b. *In the military field*, adopting an approach of "strategic patience" with a greater emphasis on restraint and defense. This is

in parallel with maintaining strong offensive capabilities and building a national defense system against mortars, rockets, and missiles. A thorough re-examination of the process to set the defense budget process is also proposed. Freilich recommends being certain that Iran never cross the nuclear threshold, and that the IDF develop offensive capabilities to ensure this. At the same time, the policy of ambiguity regarding Israel's nuclear capabilities must be preserved, but Israel must also prepare for an era in which the Begin Doctrine will no longer be practical (pp. 387-406).

- c. *On the internal level*, required are prioritizing attention to the home front and allocating more resources to it; cultivating Israel's qualitative edge, social cohesion, and social resilience; and changing the electoral system (pp. 406-412).

In the security-political establishment in Israel, as well as in the academic literature, there are different approaches to a "national security concept": is it only a military strategy, a security-political strategy, or according to the broader approach, is it a concept that includes reference to all components of national security: security, political activity, and internal issues (social and economic). Freilich only mentions this debate, although it would be expected that he engage extensively in defining and clarifying the basic concepts associated with it. He explains that he has adopted the broader approach, with the book focusing mainly on foreign and security issues, but also including those dimensions of socio-economic policy that directly affect Israel's ability to achieve its goals in these areas (p. 28). Indeed, the book attempts to present a strategy that includes a reference to all components of national security, although its reference to socio-economic issues (which are not within the author's area of expertise) is limited, and there is a lack of an orderly methodology regarding issues that should be addressed in this framework.

The national security concept itself proposed in the book does not include revolutionary changes and for the most part conforms to current policy, as Freilich himself admits, but its importance stems from the very presentation of a complete and coherent concept. Given the difficulty of addressing all components of strategy in this limited framework, suffice it to mention a number of key issues that require deeper examination, in formulating a concept at the systemic level.

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Freilich's advocacy of "strategic patience" by the IDF in the face of current asymmetric threats, with an emphasis on restraint, determination, inclusion, defense, and diplomacy, is in my eyes problematic. It requires further thought, especially in light of the limited achievements of the "campaign between wars" strategy in recent years; after all Israel's restraint toward Hezbollah after the Second Lebanon War (2006) led to the strengthening of the organization, which currently constitutes the main conventional threat to Israel.

It is difficult not to agree with the great importance that Freilich attaches to the Palestinian issue and the imperative to resolve it. However, the political implications of any potential solution cannot be ignored (he adopts the principle of separation as a paramount interest), and therefore it is appropriate that the strategy on this issue be formulated by the political echelon and not by security-political elements.

In addition, Freilich's recommendation to seek a defense pact with the United States, which is contrary to the well-known position of the security establishment, is well reasoned, but in my opinion remains unconvincing.

Freilich is right in his claim that no single researcher can cover such a complex and rich subject as Israel's national security concept (p. 349). Reading the book only strengthened my sense that the time has come to promote systematic, orderly, and regular action to formulate a national security strategy, whose absence was apparent to me during my work at the National Security Council. This document should include strategy on all issues related to national security: military, political, societal, and economic. If there were those who disagreed with this approach, the coronavirus pandemic has proved that the challenges to national resilience are not just military-political, and a strategy is needed to address socio-economic issues as well.

The Israeli National Security Council tried to promote such action as a derivative of the implementation of the National Security Council Law (2008), which states that one of its functions was to examine the security strategy of the State of Israel and suggest updates. These attempts have encountered two main barriers, whose removal is possible if there is a significant and influential political element in a government that will be committed to this effort. Most often, and under the conditions that characterize the political regime in Israel, this is the Prime Minister. One hurdle is the reluctance and apprehension of the political echelon to engage in the issue and update the concept, and certainly not to approve such a document due to the weight of the commitment it demands of decision makers. The second is the relatively weak position of the National Security Council in Israel vis-à-vis the IDF and the security establishment as a whole, which

is unwilling to recognize the National Security Council's authority to deal with this topic. For example, the IDF ignored and did not respond to a document from the National Security Council (from 2012), which included an update of the security concept and was sent to it for comment.

In an optimal situation, the formulation of a security concept should be conducted as periodic system-wide staff work, led by the National Security Council and with the assistance of all system elements: the IDF, other security agencies, and government ministries. This would happen alongside the National Security Council formulating the principles at the strategic level in dialogue with all the elements, and including three main components: a security strategy formulated by the IDF and approved by the Minister of Defense (similar to the IDF strategy document formulated under then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot in 2015); political strategy (under the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs); and a strategy for socio-economic policy. After approval by the political echelon, these principles must be translated into the work plans of each of the government ministries and budgeted as required.

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