



War and Peace, Israel-Style

War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Nationalism and Militarism in Israel

by Uri Ben-Eliezer

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Sociologist Uri Ben-Eliezer has written an important and interesting work, challenging in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The book is quantitatively demanding because of its length and the broad historical ground that it covers—from the period of Hashomer and the Jewish Brigades, to recent hostilities with Hamas in Gaza. The result is a wealth of details regarding the events that Ben-Eliezer has chosen to examine. The book is qualitatively challenging because it draws on more than one hundred years of dynamic Jewish history in the land of Israel that have unfolded in conditions of far-reaching systemic changes, and packages the insights in a rigid conceptual framework. This is done in a defiant, indicting political tone while singling out the cultural / ideological nexus between ethno-nationalism and militarism as the defining axis of the Israeli

approach. This essay seeks to engage with the qualitative challenge posed by Ben-Eliezer.

The opening theoretical chapter is of particular importance and includes a number of formative arguments. First, it claims that from the outset, it was clear that Zionism represented “nationalism based on ethnicity that emphasized particular cultural attributive principles”; second, and consequently, “there is a unique Zionist-Israeli perception that holds a large degree of permanency and uniformity with respect to the conflict [with the Arabs]” that is perceived with a binary outlook of “us” (the chosen people) and “them.” Third, this perception derives from two combined phenomena: ethno-nationalism, which “is not only a worldview that preserves cultural uniqueness based on the past, but also serves as the defining ideology that defines reality in terms of exclusion, control, and supervision,” and militarism, defined as “a tendency to solve political problems by legitimizing military means...and turning them into routine.” The fourth argument is that the combination of ethno-nationalism and militarism creates a serious risk of war. The fifth and concluding argument proposes that Israeli nationalism, combined with militaristic ideology and a religious component, constitutes “the central factor that has led Israel into conflict and wars for 100 years and made it hard to achieve peace whenever a chance has arisen.”

On the face of it, the chapters that survey the period before the establishment of the state, the period of conventional wars, and the period of “the new wars” are designed to substantiate Ben-Eliezer’s polemical argument. However, the very detailed analysis raises fundamental questions, some of which are raised with much clarity in the June 6, 2019 review by Adam Raz in *Haaretz*. What follows is a discussion of other issues that emerge from the book.

Proportionality and objectivity: Clearly Ben-Eliezer has an unequivocal position regarding the harmful centrality of the combination of Israeli ethno-nationalism and militarism on

the fundamental issues of war and peace. This opinion is clearly and repeatedly presented in a highly critical tone. However, the author is less than convincing to what extent this combination by itself affects the highly heterogeneous Israeli socio-political fabric, or has influenced Israel's decisions throughout its history on questions of foreign relations and security, and above all, how important it has been compared to other formative elements.

The singularity of the Israeli case: In the introductory chapter Ben-Eliezer refers in depth to universal theories regarding the causes of war (rationality versus emotion), while considering the role of culture and ideology in the emergence of wars. However, in order to understand the balance between war and peace in the evolving Israeli perception, any reasonable analysis must relate to the changing Israeli reality as an extraordinary case, decisively shaped by its dynamic internal and external environment. Indeed, the fundamental assumption that shaped the Arab and Palestinian conflict with Israel from its inception was that Israel was identified as an ethnic nation-state with a distinct religious frame, whose resurgence took place in a hostile Arab space. This is the cornerstone of Israel's basic identity as well as the emergence of the Palestinian political entity. The ongoing Palestinian and Arab opposition to this fundamental principle helps shape and preserve the conflict as a multilateral and multifaceted dynamic phenomenon. The author's decision to explore only the Israeli side in his book, while effectively ignoring the other parties, creates an imbalance that makes it hard to decipher the complex picture. War, like peace, is always associated with more than one side, even if one party may be deemed more responsible for its occurrence and consequences than the other.

The disappearance of peace and the political process: It is Ben-Eliezer who decided to highlight the Israeli tendency to grant war predominance over peace in the title of his book. More unsettling is his decision to exclude a

discussion of the background and consequences of the defining peace with Egypt. This omission applies also to the historic Oslo Accords with the Palestinians and the peace with Jordan. These three significant events represent decisive developments in the relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, as they placed the conflict on a different trajectory. Israel played and still plays a central role in these developments.

Between war, peace, and ongoing occupation: Ben-Eliezer does not hide his sharp criticism of the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and ascribes considerable responsibility for the absence of any political process in recent years to the Israeli approach, which he claims will lead to the collapse of democracy in Israel. His arguments on this sensitive subject are thought provoking. However, with reference to the backbone of the book's allegations, it would have been wiser to separate the discussion concerning wars from the analysis of their consequences. For example, is occupation by itself a war situation? Since signing the Oslo Accords has Israel been in a state of war with the Palestinian Authority? Does the fact that Israel has refrained from annexing the West Bank on the one hand, and decided to withdraw from the Gaza Strip on the other hand not allude to the presence of important nuances in Israel's concept of war and peace? The lack of this critical discussion prevents a deeper understanding of the full picture.

The "new wars": Ben-Eliezer rightly grants ample space to a discussion of the "new wars," but here too clings to his previous assertions about Israel's ethno-national militarism, which attributes the contrasts between the parties to the conflict to the "hierarchical relationship between rulers and ruled, conquerors and conquered." For him, "such a war accords violent expression to an ethnic, religious, or ethnic-national conflict, and does not reflect any desire [on the Israeli side] to terminate it." Consequently, he chooses to describe the Israeli approach to the second intifada as "a method

of perpetuating the occupation and control... through an organized war doctrine, which led the IDF to transform the al-Aqsa intifada into a war.” In fact, here and in the analysis of the Second Lebanon War and the rounds of hostilities with Hamas in Gaza, it would have been advisable to include a thorough discussion of the limitations of Israel’s military power, which have repeatedly affected its security doctrine and its actual implementation (see, for example, the “IDF Strategy” from 2015.)

Recently there has been a great deal of evidence that the security establishment also expresses pragmatic and restraining positions on a range of issues concerning the use of military force. A one-sided presentation of the subject casts a shadow over the entire work, which lacks the needed nuanced analysis of fundamental issues in the field of national security.

Civil-military relations: Throughout the book, the author repeatedly suggests that the military represents in an extreme manner Israel’s ethno-nationalist militarism, as “what doesn’t work with force, works with more force.” In the conclusion of the book it is even stated that “militaristic nationalism has had many spokespersons and carriers...at times the military served this approach both conceptually and through instrumental militarism.” This display calls for a focused examination, not served by anecdotal references to specific individuals (such as Rehavam “Gandhi” Ze’evi) who were hardly representative of the IDF. The fact that senior officers wielded influence over decision makers and in the public discourse for many years has been documented in numerous studies. However, recently there has been a great deal of evidence that the security establishment also expresses pragmatic and restraining positions on a range of issues concerning the use of military force. A one-sided presentation of the subject casts a shadow

over the entire work, which lacks the needed nuanced analysis of fundamental issues in the field of national security.

Toward the end of the book the author indeed clarifies that “he has not raised all the reasons why Israel has been involved in endless wars since its establishment, and that he does not pretend to reduce such a long conflict into a single factor.” “Certainly,” he suggests, “there has been no intention to disregard the share and contribution of the Arab states and the Palestinians in particular to the ongoing national conflict.” Possibly this important comment could have been the appropriate opening remark to a book that examines the range of factors shaping Israel’s wars, one that does not ignore the Arab contribution to the conflict, and does not disregard the controversies that took shape within the Israeli political leadership and in the public sphere on the issues of war and peace. Still, although Ben-Eliezer decided otherwise, his book is indeed an important contribution to the public discourse on Israel’s role in marginalizing the political process for promoting peace with its neighbors—an issue of dramatic importance on the Israeli scene.

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