The Lost "Iron Wall": Rethinking an Obsolete National Security Concept

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The ultimate goal of the founders of the Zionist movement was to establish a sustainable Jewish state, and upon its establishment, to persuade the Arabs to agree to end the conflict by building an insurmountable military "iron wall." This strategy was realized in 1967. Prior to the Six-Day War, Israel did not have the bargaining chips that could be traded for Arab recognition of its right to exist, but the conquest of the territories during the war created this option. Nevertheless, Israel continued to emphasize military force and "security lines" as its security concept. With the exception of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, Israel refused to make use of the political option, and efforts to settle the conflict have remained incomplete for various reasons. Against this backdrop and given new emerging threats, the persistent reliance on military force while ignoring the diplomatic channel, especially the Arab Peace Initiative that strives to end the conflict, is leading Israel into a military dead end, and it could pay a heavy price for this in the future.

Keywords: security concept, military activism, diplomatic activism, Six-Day War, fixation, alternative, the Arab League's peace initiative

Introduction

The term "national security," which emerged after World War II, refers to the protective measures that a state takes to defend its core values, also known as national interests. These include the state's sovereignty, its territorial integrity, and the security of its citizens. The national security doctrine forms the most comprehensive and intellectual foundation for all issues related to national security, first and foremost, defining the values that must be defended, the nature of threats, and the methods of achieving defense. The national security concept is the dominant framework guiding policy decisions.

Unlike the United States and other countries, Israel does not have a written national security doctrine; instead, it has an oral doctrine, known as the "national security concept." However, some view the document written by David Ben-Gurion in October 1953 as a formal security concept based on Jabotinsky's "iron wall" idea from the 1920s (Ben-Israel, 2013). In practice, Ben-Gurion's document was more of a strategic situation assessment, focusing on questions related to the force buildup of the Israel Defense Forces (Bar-On, 2017, p. 297; Bar-Zohar, 1978, p. 955; Segev, 2018, p. 486). The only significant attempt to address this gap was the establishment of the Meridor Committee,

in response to a mandate from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz. Although the committee submitted its conclusions and recommendations in 2006, and they were adopted by the minister of defense, they were not formally approved by the Ministerial Committee on National Security.

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The absence of a written and up-to-date national security doctrine in a country like Israel, which has experienced many wars, has significant drawbacks. First, decision-makers lack a guiding framework to shape their decisions as they relate to security. Furthermore, the security establishment does not release an updated document after a given period of time or following prominent military events, nor does it conduct a systemic discussion on the changing strategic environment, and ways of addressing new challenges, or the need to stop investing resources in dealing with obsolete threats. Consequently, there is no process of learning from past failures and successes. This has resulted in a series of strategic political and operational failures in Operation Protective Edge in 2014 (Shelah, 2015), and the same failures have occurred in the current war in Gaza, with new ones being added.

Most researchers who have written about Israel's national security policy (e.g., Eisenkot & Siboni, 2019; Elran et al., 2016; Wald, 1987; Tal, 1996; Yaniv, 1994; Levite, 1989; Arad & Ben-Har, 2016; Freilich, 2019; Shelah, 2003; Maoz, 2006; van Creveld, 2002) have focused on the military aspect of policy and have proposed suggestions for improving decision-making processes.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to suggest improvements to the existing policy but rather to present an alternative. The main argument presented here, based on a historical analysis, is that the predominant concept that has shaped Israel's national security policy for over 70 years, which emphasizes enhancing military capabilities, relying on deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory, was suitable and relevant until the Six-Day War. However, since June 1967, the exclusive adherence to this concept and the reluctance to pursue political settlements based on the principle of "land for peace"—except for the peace agreement with Egypt—have led Israel into a deadlock, culminating in the Swords of Iron war. The future appears even more bleak; the missile arsenals of Hezbollah and other forces in the axis of resistance pose a semi-existential threat for which there is no real effective military response. Furthermore, if Iran passes the threshold and becomes a nuclear state, Israel will face an existential threat to which deterrence, the only response that has been relied on in the past, has already proven unsuccessful.

This leads to a clear conclusion: Israel's security must be based on a combination of achieving political settlements that will create a status quo acceptable to all sides, including the Palestinians. This will reduce the motivation of potential adversaries for hostility and maintain military capabilities to support the settlements reached. Only this combination will provide the State of Israel with reasonable security at a reasonable cost.

The Security Concept Until 1967

Although the Zionist movement initially tried to ignore the fact that Palestine was not a land without a nation, the Jaffa riots (May 1921) highlighted the need to address the Arab threat. One result was the establishment of the Haganah. The second, more conceptual result was formulated in Jabotinsky's essay "The Iron Wall," which essentially stated that the Arabs would only accept the existence of

the Jewish state after being convinced that they could defeat it through military force. In light of the results of the War of Independence, it appeared that this moment had arrived. However, the failure of attempts to achieve settlements, along with an increase in routine security incidents, made it clear that this was not the case, and Israel would need to prepare itself for a long-term conflict. Against this backdrop of escalating border tensions, a conflict between two concepts emerged among Israel's leaders: "diplomatic activism," championed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Moshe Sharett, and "military activism," led by Prime Minister and Minister of Defense David Ben-Gurion. The first approach emphasized consolidating Israel's international standing, exercising military restraint, and moderating the conflict through diplomacy. The second approach focused on building Israel's military strength and demonstrating the use of force through reprisal operations as a means to achieve security (Bialer, 1984).

The differences between the two approaches related to the means, but the ends, as defined in the 1920s, were shared by both: creating a situation in which Arab countries would agree to end the conflict without significant changes to the borders and without accepting a large number of Arab refugees (Shalom, 1998). Ben-Gurion clearly expressed this at various opportunities. For example, in a private letter that he sent in April 1956 to his childhood friend Shlomo Zemach, who had expressed objections to the use of force, Ben-Gurion clarified the essence of his security concept: "The future of the Jewish people will not depend only on the sword. Our neighbors have forced war on us— and we will fight as long as there is a danger to our existence, but we will not build our future on wars. Israel's future will depend only on our ability to work and create" (Ben-Gurion, 1956).

The removal of Moshe Sharett as minister of foreign affairs in June 1956 proved a historic turning point. His departure left the decision-making leadership without a central figure who could serve as a counterbalance to the

dominant concept, resulting in the elimination of diplomatic activism from the security concept. The immediate expression of this was a quick military escalation on the borders, culminating in the Sinai Campaign initiated by Israel in the fall of 1956. The military success of the operation further solidified the reliance on force.

The decade that followed, from the Sinai withdrawal in March 1957 and ending with the Egyptian army's entry into Sinai in May 1967, was the golden age of the military activism concept. This concept relied initially on a deterrence strategy, leveraging the Arab fear of the IDF's strength and the willingness of Arab leaders, particularly Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, to accept the status quo as long as it was tolerable.

The result was that this period was considered the best decade in Israel's history. The security situation was calm, allowing most state resources to be dedicated to developing the economy and infrastructure. The population grew rapidly, the economy thrived, industrialization was boosted, the GNP increased at an unprecedented rate, and the living standard and public services improved. The calm also enabled significant investment in the defense budget in preparing the IDF for the future, including quantitative buildup of both the armored forces and air force as well as intensive training for war. In addition, the nuclear facility—another "iron wall"—was built in Dimona to support the conventional deterrence capability.

However, despite these positive developments, the conditions necessary for resolving the conflict at an acceptable price for Israel did not materialize during this decade. The first shift in Arab sentiment occurred in the spring of 1965 when Habib Bourguiba, the president of Tunisia, gave a speech at a refugee camp in Jordan, where he denounced calls for Israel's destruction and advocated for partitioning the land and pursuing Jewish-Arab cooperation in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to the partition plan borders and acceptance

of the return of the 1948 refugees. In response, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol reaffirmed Israel's position of striving for peace within the current borders and refusing to accept a large number of refugees.

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The Security Concept During the Years 1967–2024

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The second change came with the UN Security Council Resolution 242, issued in November 1967. This resolution established the principle of "land for peace," meaning that the territories captured during the war would be returned in exchange for an end to the conflict. Essentially, the international community acknowledged Israel's demand for Arab recognition of its prewar borders as legitimate and unchangeable, only to be altered through mutual agreement. The resolution also called for a mutually agreed-upon solution to the refugee problem.

The third change saw a gradual transformation in the Arab world's stance, particularly Egypt's stance, toward Israel. Prior to the war, Arab leaders consistently declared their objective of "eliminating the State of Israel" (Harkabi, 1968, p. 15). However, these declarations, more symbolic than actionable, started to fade after the humiliating defeat in the Six-Day War. The Arab nations began to seek change in the new status quo through military and diplomatic means. Alongside the slogan "what is taken by force will be returned by force," the Egyptians engaged in rapid military rehabilitation and initiated hostilities along the Suez Canal. They also accepted Resolution 242, which acknowledged Israel's right to exist. After Sadat came to power, Egypt formally announced that they would be willing to sign a peace agreement and end the conflict if Israel returned to the international border. Another step in this direction occurred in February 1973 when Sadat's emissary presented Henry Kissinger with a proposal addressing the majority of Israel's security demands.

The fourth change that occurred was Israel's stance. On June 19, 1967, the Eshkol government made a secret decision that Israel would agree to return to the international border with Egypt and Syria (but not with Jordan) in exchange for security arrangements and ensuring freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran and the Suez Canal. However, once it became clear that there was no immediate international pressure to return the conquered territories, Israel stated that it would "fortify its standing" in the territories based on security needs. In practice, this demand for "secure borders" (Pedatzur, 1996, p. 113) reflected confidence in the IDF's strength and a preference for military capabilities over diplomatic options. It became a major obstacle in reaching a settlement and basing the state's security not only on force but also on reducing the Arabs' motivation to harm it.

Despite the territorial changes brought about by the Six-Day War, Israel's security concept still relied on deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory. Although these had proven effective in the decade before the war, their limitations became evident. It seemed that the crushing victory, the Arab loss of military strength, and Israel's ability to threaten strategic assets would deter a new Arab military initiative, but the reality was different. The Arab refusal to accept Israeli control of the conquered territories led

to a willingness to challenge Israeli deterrence. This resulted in a low-intensity, continuous conflict on all borders and eventually escalated into an intensive war of attrition along the Suez Canal after the rehabilitation of the Egyptian army. While the IDF's deterrent capability prevented a large-scale military initiative, it struggled to end a limited conflict that was becoming increasingly costly.

The limitations of Israel's deterrence became evident in October 1973. In a confidential meeting a year earlier, Sadat declared his intention to go to war despite Israel's military superiority. He explained at length that this was a "difficult challenge," but "Allah knows that we have no other solution." From Sadat's perspective, maintaining the status quo was stagnation and would result in complete ineptitude. He asserted that they would not accept this and that the outcome of the war would decide their existence.

Israel's strategy, which bolstered Egypt's desperate decision to go to war, clearly reflected Israel's reliance on military force as the sole solution to their security problems. This was evident in Prime Minister Golda Meir's "kitchen cabinet," composed of Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, who strongly advocated for military activism; Yisrael Galili, the prime minister's close adviser and a leader of the hawkish faction within the Labor Party; and Meir, who was chosen to replace Minister of Foreign Affairs Sharett due to her hawkish views and who made no attempt to incorporate diplomatic strategies into the security concept upon assuming the role. All three correctly assessed that deterrence would not hold up under the burden imposed by continuing the status quo with Egypt. However, rather than seeking to alleviate the burden through a partial arrangement at the Suez Canal, which was feasible and carried minimal security risks, they chose to rely on the IDF's superiority. Their hope was that while war could not be prevented, an Egyptian defeat would sustain the status quo for a few more years.

A prominent expression of this concept, perhaps the most noteworthy in Israel's history, occurred during a discussion on April 18, 1973. The discussion was prompted by reliable sources, which warned that Egypt intended to go to war in mid-May. Meir, Dayan, and Galili during the discussion agreed that Israel was indeed headed toward a major war. At one point, Galili mentioned the possibility of avoiding war through diplomatic discussions and a return to the previous border. On the surface, he presented a diplomatic alternative. However, all three recognized that considering this option was pointless, as the preference for a successful war over a settlement was evident. Their main concern was preventing a discussion of this matter within the government forum.

The limitations of the warning capabilities were also evident during this period. Although the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) provided a timely warning of war a few months before the outbreak of the War of Attrition, it completely failed to anticipate the possibility of Soviet military intervention in the war. This failure brought Israel to the brink of a conflict with a superpower, limited the air force's operations, and influenced the decision-makers to agree to end the War of Attrition under conditions they had previously rejected (Adamsky & Bar-Joseph, 2006). There is no need to further discuss the MID's failure to provide warning before the Yom Kippur War. This failure provided clear evidence that this aspect of the security concept could not be relied upon, particularly during a period when the intelligence community's capabilities reached new heights.

Finally, the reality in which the IDF maintained more secure positions than in the past also revealed the weakness of the third element of the security concept—the notion of decisive victory. The IDF did not defeat the Egyptians in the War of Attrition, a prolonged static war of which it had no previous experience, and despite its excellent quality, it did not achieve

a decisive victory in the surprise outbreak of the Yom Kippur War (Kober, 1995, pp. 313–396).

The seven years between the Six-Day War and the end of the Yom Kippur War unequivocally showed the high price Israel paid for adhering to the concept that Israel's security should rely exclusively on military force and "security borders." Despite the IDF's military superiority, this period witnessed the most intense series of military conflicts in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The number of casualties increased from under 200 during the previous decade to over 4,000. Additionally, the defense budget, which had previously been less than 10 percent of GNP, more than doubled. The number of military companies engaged in operational activity also rose significantly from 8 to almost 70 (Nadel, 2006, p. 170), and the burden of regular and reserve service increased considerably. According to these indicators, when Israel had "security borders" and was at the peak of its military power, it was actually less secure than during the period before the Six-Day War, when its borders were referred to as "the Auschwitz borders."

The lesson from the Yom Kippur War, that Israel's security relies on both Arab acceptance of the status quo and the IDF's strength was not internalized. The main conclusion drawn from the Yom Kippur War of "never again," fueled skepticism and mistrust toward diplomatic settlements as a means of reducing the threat. This was evident during the negotiations over the disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria, with the settlers in the Golan—a central pressure group opposing it, due to fears of renewed Syrian aggression—stating they would only agree to an IDF withdrawal if "the agreement will bring quiet for two years." Minister of Defense Shimon Peres estimated it would last about a year (Gur, 1998, pp. 45, 60). Even when the two disengagement agreements, at the Suez Canal and the Golan, lasted for years skeptics did not change their stance. The Rabin government's opposition to Kissinger's initiative to reach a second disengagement

agreement in Sinai, which led to the Israeli–American crisis and the Ford administration's policy of "reassessment," exemplified this well.

The "never again" policy also led to an intensive process of strengthening the IDF in response to the diminished Arab military threats. Although oil profits did open new avenues of empowerment for some Arab countries, these were not the countries in direct confrontation with Israel. In contrast, the Egyptian army did not undergo a proper rehabilitation process after the war, partly due to the disconnect between Egypt and the Soviet Union. While the Syrian army did recover, it did not have state-of-the-art weapons systems. Egypt made clear its desire to end the conflict, and Syria's leader, Hafez al-Assad, also expressed readiness for a formal peace agreement with Israel in exchange for a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights (Maoz, 1998, pp. 110–112). However, the assessment of the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) exaggerated the threats to Israel, resulting in an extensive quantitative and qualitative buildup of the IDF. This focus on military buildup came at the expense of other needs and contributed to severe inflation, a deficit, an economic crisis, and a lost decade for the Israeli economy.

Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur, who led the military buildup process, eventually acknowledged that the buildup was largely unnecessary. After Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the head of the MID admitted their mistaken conception of the Egyptian threat, Gur concluded that Israel needed to reflect on its demands since 1974 to strengthen the IDF. He highlighted the significant budgets invested and commitments made to the United States, based on military and economic aid. Gur emphasized that this occurred while Egypt had already abandoned the option of war and pursued peace (Gur, 1998, p. 344).

Subsequent military actions demonstrated a lack of real soul-searching, except for personal reflection by Minister of Foreign Affairs Moshe Dayan and Minister of Defense Ezer Weizman.

After the Yom Kippur War, they dropped the demand for "security borders" in Sinai and focused on achieving a peace agreement with Egypt, which involved an Israeli withdrawal to the international border. It is worth noting that this narrowly reached agreement remains one of Israel's most significant strategic assets for security.

The peace agreement with Egypt, the Iran–Iraq War, the First Gulf War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union temporarily reduced Israel's fundamental security challenges, creating an opportunity to resolve the conflict. Speculating on how the Middle East and the threats to Israel would have appeared if the Oslo Process had not been curtailed by Rabin's assassination, the 2000 Camp David summit had not failed, or a peace agreement with Syria had been achieved is challenging. Such an agreement would have aimed to disarm Hezbollah among other objectives. The ongoing conflict with the Palestinians and Hezbollah's military buildup have imposed a substantial cost on Israel, suggesting that these failures have compromised Israel's ability to defend itself more than the withdrawal from the Golan Heights and the evacuation of most settlements in the West Bank would.

In 2002, Saudi Arabia proposed a comprehensive peace initiative that later became the Arab League's peace initiative. This initiative focused on several key points: a complete Israeli withdrawal from the territories conquered in 1967, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, an end to the conflict, Arab countries' recognition of Israel, and the normalization of relations with Israel. This peace plan was the long-awaited solution to Israel's security problems, but unfortunately, it became entangled in the complexities of Israeli politics and ultimately faded away. Among the many missed opportunities in the Israeli–Arab conflict since 1967, the ongoing disregard for the Arab Peace Initiative for over 20 years is a puzzling pattern of behavior.

While accepting the initiative in its current form may not fully address the threats posed by the radical axis led by Iran, it does offer good chances of reducing these threats, establishing regional allies, and effectively tackling the growing security challenges. Despite Iran's unwavering ideological stance of seeking the elimination of the "Zionist regime," it has clearly stated to the Syrians, both in 1993 and again in 1999, that it does not oppose talks with Israel or an Israeli–Syrian settlement (Sagi, 2011, pp. 191–192). Iran is also a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which consistently supports the Arab League's peace plan and the two-state solution. If Israel is willing to proceed with a diplomatic plan based on the Arab peace proposal, it is likely to put the Iranian leadership in an uncomfortable position. This would make it difficult for them to oppose measures that are acceptable to the Palestinian Authority. Furthermore, starting a large-scale diplomatic process that would strengthen regional stability "could reduce the influence of the pro-Iranian axis and undermine Iran's regional standing."

Moreover, accepting the Arab Peace Initiative would bring several benefits. First, it would strengthen the alliance between moderate Sunni countries and Israel, enhancing security cooperation among them. This, in turn, could improve Israel's ability to freely operate militarily in regions near Iran. By establishing "forward siege bases" and posing a threat to Iran, Israel may increase Iran's military concerns. Consequently, Tehran may become more inclined to engage in direct dialogue with Israel. Initially, this dialogue could minimize the risk of accidental conflict and eventually extend to addressing other important matters (Haiminis, 2023).

Conclusion

In light of the security benefits associated with accepting the Arab Peace Initiative, it is clear that the decision to dismiss the option of ending the conflict under reasonable conditions is more

indicative of the political shifts Israeli society has undergone over the years, rather than genuine security concerns. This is because, over the course of several decades, the concept of security has changed significantly to align more closely with the diplomatic activism of Moshe Sharett. The role of military personnel is particularly important in this context. At the end of the Yom Kippur War, military personnel were "the forgotten heroes of the negotiations […] who gave Kissinger the ideas and the security arrangements that formed the basis of the breakthroughs that he succeeded in making" (Indyk, 2023, p. 390). In the 1990s it was generals like Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Uri Sagi who paved the way for bold steps with the Syrians, and it was ultimately political considerations that prevented the process from being completed (Rabinovich, 1998; Sagi, 2011). The establishment of the group Commanders for Israel's Security, which sees political-security arrangements with the Arab world, combined with advancing an agreement with the Palestinians based on the principle of two states for two peoples, as a top national objective, is the clearest expression of the current position held by most senior officials in the security establishment. Those who have prevented progress toward a comprehensive settlement are not military personnel but rather politicians driven by ideological and narrow concerns and not security considerations.

Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023 dealt a severe blow to the belief that military superiority alone can ensure Israel's security. Deterrence crumbled, early warning systems failed, and defense was ineffective for many hours. A decisive victory was also delayed. While the tragic failure and the significant loss of lives were attributed to a series of human errors, the fact remains that Israel has suffered heavy losses in the only two surprise attacks in its history, underscoring that adhering to a security concept that has not stood the test puts the country at high risk. Therefore, our experience teaches us that the current policy must be changed as soon as possible to adapt to the harsh reality.

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