# Culture and Security
# Policy in Israel

– Emily Landau
and Tamar Malz –

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

# 21

# Culture and Security Policy in Israel

*Emily Landau and Tamar Malz*
*Jafee Center for Strategic Studies (JCSS), Tel Aviv University*

# Contents

**"The Chase", words by Yaron London, music by Nachum Heiman**

*A good land with honey flowing through its veins*
*But with blood flowing in its rivers like water*
*A land with mountains of copper*
*But nerves of steel.*

*A land with annals of the chase*
*Two thousand pages, and one more*
*Until the oxygen in its lungs is almost spent*
*Because of the pace of the chase.*

*A land that will be chased by its foes*
*And whose foes will be chased in the chase*
*The land will overcome its foes*
*And these will never entrap it.*

*A land that sees its life*
*Hanging so precariously*
*It fears for its life, but as if not concerned*
*It waits for the end of the chase.*

*The end of the chase hides in a crevice*
*And covers its face in this hiding place*
*But it will come to an end*
*Like the sun in the East it will come.*


*Then Mothers will no longer mourn*
*Nor Fathers for their sons*
*Yes it will come*
*And till then our feet will never tire*
*Of chasing the path of our hopes.*

(translation by the authors)

# Introduction

The above song (loosely translated into English by the authors) was written by Yaron London, a very well-known media figure in Israel. It was written in the late 1960s, during the War of Attrition, the armed conflict between Egypt and Israel across the Suez Canal in the years after the 1967 war. The song is sung by Chava Alberstein, one of Israel's most accomplished singers, who is very much identified through her songs with Israel; Alberstein has many songs that focus on Israel's cultural and historical experiences. Specifically targeting Israel's security situation, this song actually captures some of the important cultural motifs that constitute Israel's "security culture," such as the ongoing (2000 year) struggle for survival, and the intertwining sense of extreme vulnerability and weariness with this struggle, together with a determined inner strength to overcome any enemy set on Israel's destruction. Finally, there is the hope for a better future, when the nation can finally put to rest the endless chase against its foes.

In considering some of the dominant themes that influence and characterize Israel's security thinking, this paper will develop the notion of "security culture." Security culture will serve as the prism through which the discussion of the evolution of Israel's security policy will be carried out. It will be employed in the sense that it has been developed in some of the recent literature in international relations theory, namely, as a dominant social construct or frame, which provides the parameters within which a state's security "reality" is discussed, debated, and constructed. Keith Krause defines national security culture as "enduring and widely-shared beliefs, traditions, attitudes, and symbols that inform the ways in which a state's/society's interests and values with respect to security, stability and peace are perceived, articulated and advanced."[1]

By seriously considering the central myths, motifs, symbols, and norms that characterize a society in the security realm, we are in a better position to understand specific security policies that are devised and adopted by states. This approach works on the assumption that what is considered to be a state's relevant security "reality" is not an entirely objective reality, but rather is influenced by historical and cultural features within which the contours of this reality are shaped and given meaning by states.

Understanding security in this manner is most important particularly as far as efforts to create common security concepts for the purpose of promoting regional cooperative security endeavors. When the objective is cooperation in the security realm, the first stage must involve a clear effort to understand the roots and underpinnings of dominant security perceptions in each of the participating states: how and why particular views of security and security threats were created and sustained by states over the years. A final introductory caveat is that while analysis of cultural criteria is not foreign to historical accounts of national development (as certain references to Anita Shapira below will highlight), developing and applying these ideas to strategic studies is much less common. Based on the view that cultural analysis should not be restricted solely to historical or sociological accounts, but rather that links can and should be stretched from the realm of culture to that of threat perceptions and other "hard core" strategic calculations of states, we will expand somewhat upon the conceptual framework of analysis.

After setting out this conceptual framework, security culture will thereafter be shown to be central to the discussion of the specific nature of civil-military relations in Israel, as well as most important for understanding Israel's dominant threat perceptions today. The sum total of these observations will then be incorporated in the final section of this paper, which includes discussion of how the roles of Europe, the US, and the EMP are perceived in Israel's security thinking.

---

[1] Keith Krause, "Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Multilateral Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Dialogues: An Overview" in Keith Krause (ed.) (1997) *Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Multilateral Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Dialogues* , Research Report Prepared for the Non-Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, Canada. p. 15.

# The evolution of Israel's security policy: the formative years

Looking back to the pre-state years, this section examines the question of how certain cultural principles, cultivated in these years, were used to enhance and provide direction regarding the meaning and place of "security" as part of the enterprise of building the new nation-state in Israel. Moreover, we will explore how these principles thereafter intertwined with inputs drawn from the strategic environment – in a process which led to the development of a security policy known today as an "offensive-defensive policy".[2]

Focusing on the pre-state years, we find that "security", as an idea, played a dominant role in crystallizing the new Jewish-Israeli national identity. The notion of security was a prevalent one in many states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the Jewish community in Palestine (the "Yishuv"), it was integrated with the notion of self-respect. Military procedures were perceived of in the context of achieving self-respect, and presenting the image of a new, proud and strong Jewish people. A number of cultural principles (some drawing upon Israeli history and culture) were cultivated in this regard. They became instrumental in creating a sense of confidence within the emergent entity regarding its ability to achieve its ultimate goal – the establishment of a Jewish state. The dominant motifs were: "a nation that stands alone"; "few against many"; fear of annihilation; self-reliance; strength; determination and initiative. These motifs easily locked into the ideas of security and self-respect that leaders were promoting in the new Yishuv, played an active role in the creation of the new national identity, and became the basis of the emerging security culture.

Interestingly enough, we find that the principles themselves were of two types. Some ("a nation that stands alone", "few against many", fear of annihilation) emphasized the *vulnerability* of the Yishuv and the threats it faced, while others (self-reliance, strength, determination and initiative) provided the answer, in terms of their focus on important elements of *strength*. The motifs were thus used as a means of simultaneously emphasizing the ever-present looming and imminent danger (locking into the fear of annihilation), while, at the same time, pointing to the sources of strength as a means of overcoming (with the emphasis on determination and initiative).

The historian, Anita Shapira, demonstrates this double message by highlighting the use leaders in the Yishuv period made of what she calls the Tel-Hai myth.[3] Shapira shows that the myth was employed as a means of creating the notion of "a few against many" and "a nation that stands alone," while assimilating within this image also a strong sense of power and determination. The myth symbolized courage, strength, and an attempt to revive the lost Jewish honor. The warriors taking part in the fight over Tel-Hai symbolized the Zionists' new means for accomplishing its ends. The Tel-Hai theme also entailed a clearly *defensive* element: the sanctification of standing firm and holding on to one's own territory.[4] Thus we see how the dual principles of vulnerability and strength translated into, and became embedded within a myth that emphasized how strength would be cultivated and used for the purpose of overcoming this acute sense of vulnerability. In other words, strength and power were envisioned in terms of their role in ensuring continued survival. By encapsulating the perception of the use of *force* as a means of retaining the *status quo*, a *defensive* security ethos was born. This ethos drew on the rationale that force was necessary as a means of guarding and maintaining one's territory over the long term, due to the presence of enemies who continuously sought one's destruction.

A modification in the national ethos began to occur during the years of the Arab revolt, when an offensive element was integrated. The 1936-9 Arab revolt was the first campaign in the violent

---

[2] For a description of this policy, see in particular Ariel Levite (1989) *Offense and Defense in Israeli Military Doctrine,* JCSS Study no. 12 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).

[3] In March 1920, Tel Hai, a small Jewish settlement in upper Galilee, was attacked by Arabs. Two neighbouring settlements surrendered, but the settlers in Tel Hai, led by Joseph Trumpeldor, attempted to hold their ground. Finally the settlement was overtaken, and Trumpeldor and seven of his comrades were killed. These fighters became heroes for their attempt to stand their ground, "a few against many."

[4] Anita Shapira (1992), *"Herev Hayona" (Land and Power)* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved) (Hebrew) p. 151.

struggle between Arabs and Jews for dominance in Palestine. The official response of the Jewish local leadership to the Arab revolt was restraint. However this initiated a debate in the Yishuv over the preferred strategy, and slowly the passive defense approach opened itself up to the inclusion of offensive elements.[5]

Between the Second World War and the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, the Jewish leadership in Israel decided that the current efforts were not sufficient to guarantee the achievement of a state. Moreover, until 1947, the Jews had never directly faced the Arabs, without the British serving as a defensive second line. This bred uncertainties and fears regarding what might happen after the departure of the British force, and led to an alteration in strategic thought. The result was that the Jewish society moved from a defensive ethos towards an offensive/defensive one.

During the War of Independence the joint defensive and offensive ethos was put into practice. Knowing that the desire to establish the Jewish state would be accomplished only at the cost of a bloody war, and that such a war was not a target in itself but rather a means to achieve and establish a nation state, lent justification to the integration of elements of a more offensive policy – such as greater initiative taken by small units. In order to prepare the Yishuv for war, the leadership acted in two integrated directions: first enhancing military preparedness and including the civilian rear (both in Israel and the diaspora) in these efforts and, secondly, constructing a firm national image based on national values and principles.[6]

### *Constructing security policy: the first years of statehood*

As was described, the process of constructing the basis for Israel's security policy began in the pre-state period, culminating in the execution of the offensive/defensive approach in the War of Independence. This process continued into the post-Independence War years when Israel's basic threat perception and security policy were determined. These continue to be upheld until the present.

The threat perception that was consolidated by Israel's decision-makers arose from the historical experience of the War of Independence and the events that preceded this event – mainly the UN Partition Plan; the rejection of this plan by the Arab states and the Arab Higher Committee; the British evacuation, and, of course, the war itself. It was a two-pronged threat perception: the first level of threat was the "basic" threat of a "second round" of war. This was grounded in the perception that the Arab states would not be able to come to terms with their 1948 defeat, or reconcile themselves to the existence of the state of Israel. They would be bent on Israel's destruction. The second level of threat considered the "current" threat – the day-to-day security threats that Israel had to manage. In the initial days of the state, these related in the main to infiltrations and border incidents.[7] This threat perception engendered the development of a security policy that tended to base itself on analysis of worst-case scenarios.[8] In response to successive events – mainly, infiltrations and border incidents from Egypt, Jordan and Syria – Israel decided on acts of reprisal and initiative.

During these years, Israel's strategy became a more stable offensive-defensive one. Drawing on the dominant security culture, its security policy embodied two central principles: *deterrence* and *self-reliance*. According to Dan Horowitz,[9] the notion of *deterrence* became prevalent in the public and political discourse in Israel in the late 1950s and early 60s, after being adopted by security elites from the international strategic studies jargon. The unique blend of defensive and offensive elements in Israel's conception of both deterrence and defense -- which draw upon elements entrenched within its security culture -- are reflected in the writings of Yigal Allon.[10] In 1959, upon his return from studies at Oxford, Allon published a book with his thoughts on Israel's security

---

[5] Shapira (1992) pp. 299, 341-2.

[6] Zahava Ostfeld (1994) *"Tzava Nolad" (An Army Is Born)* (Tel Aviv: Misrad HaBitachon) (Hebrew) pp. 25-6.

[7] See for example, Zaki Shalom (1995) *"David Ben-Gurion: Medinat Yisrael V'HaOlam HaAravi, 1949-56" (David Ben-Gurion: The State of Israel and the Arab World, 1949-56)* (Kiryat Sde Boker: The Ben-Gurion Research Center) (Hebrew) p.148.

[8] Dan Horowitz (1984) 'HaTfisa HaYisraelit Shel Bitachon Leumi, 1948-1972" ("Israel's National Security Conception") in Benny Neuberger (ed.) (1984) *"Diplomatia BiTzel HaImut" (Diplomacy and Confrontation: Selected Issues in Israel's Foreign Relations, 1948-1972)* (Tel Aviv: Open University Press) (Hebrew) pp. 105-6.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Yigal Allon held leading positions in the Yishuv period. He was commander of the Palmach unit, and later an IDF general. Following Independence, he held important positions in Israel's politics and government and was one of the prominent leaders of the Labor movement.

conception. He justified the Sinai campaign of 1956 on the basis of the principle of self-defense, according to which Israel has the moral right to pre-empt an enemy attack based on the evaluation that such an attack would constitute a devastating blow to the nation as such. Allon maintained that the war:

> *"was also a clear case of self defense, notwithstanding its offensive nature… the [Sinai Campaign] saved Israel from a sure Egyptian surprise initiative, therefore here as well, the Egyptians and not the Israelis hold the historic responsibility for the offensive-defensive means that Israel was forced to carry out." (emphasis added).*[11]

In a later interpretation of Allon's writings, historian Mordechai Bar-On places this principle of self defense within the context of a more general conception of deterrence. Bar-On notes that Allon put particular emphasis on the danger of a deterrence *failure*. Because such a scenario was considered to be something that could bring about the annihilation of Israel, he was led to include within his conception of deterrence, the principle of *pre-emptive strike*. We see how this understanding of deterrence, with its intellectual roots in the East-West Cold War experience, was heavily influenced by pre-existing Israeli strategic thought, and was constructed on the basis of the principles of Israel's national security culture – the presence of a sure external threat to survival (vulnerability), and Israel's perceived need to ensure that the threat does not materialize, in this case, by employing pre-emptive offensive measures (strength).[12]

As to the notion of *self-reliance*, Horowitz notes that it referred to the need for autonomy (and not autarchy) in running the state's security affairs. This perception, he argues, goes together with the power-based strategy that was adopted by policy makers. This, because it followed the logic that Israel would have to accumulate a significant degree of power under its exclusive control, in order to ensure self-sufficiency. Horowitz quotes David Ben-Gurion on this:

> *"… Should we depend on France? On the US? (…) Israel cannot depend on their assistance – and not because it doubts their willingness and honest intentions (…) The Israeli people must take care to uphold these friendships and enhance them, and not to believe they can be taken for granted; but the defense of Israel rests first and foremost on its ability to defend itself with its own capabilities, and to deter its enemies until these enemies cease being enemies" (emphases appear in the original text)*[13].

This quotation underscores the continuous effort it was believed Israel must make in order to enhance its own strength for the express purpose of deterrence and self-defense.

Over the years, the notion of self-reliance has had implications both in terms of how Israel has tended to regard the surrounding Arab states, as well as how it has viewed the role and importance of potential allies. Regarding the Arab states, self-reliance has come to be very closely identified with the notion of deterrence. There is a strong belief, up to the present, that Israel's survival is not ensured, not only on the basis of ongoing assessments of enemy military strength, but also primarily because of a sense that its very legitimacy as a state has not been accepted by all relevant parties in the Middle East. Therefore, Israel must have at its disposal its own means to ultimately ensure its ongoing survival. Israel's policy of nuclear deterrence addresses both Israel's desire for self-reliance, as well as its preference for a robust deterrent capability that does not require the state to bolster deterrence by pre-emptive action. While other aspects of Israel's security policy are often the subject of debate, maintenance of nuclear deterrence enjoys relatively deep and widespread public support in Israel, as the ultimate "insurance policy" against annihilation. The sense that Israel continually faces a scenario where any number of Arab states may seek its destruction has led to a strong reliance on maintenance of overwhelming military strength.

---

[11] Yigal Allon (1981, third edition) *"Masach Shel Hol" (A Curtain of Sand)* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad) (Hebrew) p. 75.

[12] For an interesting discussion on the subject see: Yoav Ben-Horin and Barry Posen (1981) *Israel's Strategic Doctrine*, (Santa Monica: Rand) R-2845-NA. note 38, pp.12-13.

[13] *Ibid*, p. 112

As far as the guarantees that allies could supply, Israel clearly attaches importance to efforts to identify such potential allies, and to cultivate relations with them. However, Israel is quite reluctant for this to come at the expense of its ongoing ability to deal with (and preferably to deter) any possible coalition of Arab states that may attempt to challenge it militarily. Dependence on others goes against the grain of Israel's need for self-reliance.

Over the years, Israel's security thinking has thus come to be framed primarily in terms of *unilateral solutions*, preferably supplemented by bilateral guarantees. *Multilateral* thinking as a route to enhanced security has only very recently been introduced into the security debate in Israel. In light of the previous discussion, it becomes all the more clear why there is likely to be strong resistance to the multilateral approach, if this route is perceived of as undermining core elements of strength that Israel views as essential for ensuring its survival.

# Civil-Military relations and Israel's security culture

A superficial look at civil-military relations in Israel would reveal what would seem to be a potentially dangerous picture. The closeness of these relations, to the point of virtual overlap in some cases,[14] would seem to herald great risks to the democratic functioning of government. The role of the military (IDF – Israeli Defense Forces) in Israeli society and decision-making circles is clearly most prominent. According to one of the leading scholars on civil-military relations in Israel, the situation in Israel today is one where the military "is an equal partner in the policy process."[15] The IDF holds significant power as the leading organization in Israel that deals with strategic thinking and planning, and as such, high-ranking IDF officers have also been an integral part of various stages of peace negotiations, as well as instrumental in discussions regarding the implementation of peace agreements.

The first point to be made regarding this depiction of reality is that there are a number of factors that account for the salience that the military has assumed in Israel. First of all, Israel is the only post-World War II democratic state which has been in an almost constant state of violent conflict with its neighbors since the time of its inception,[16] which means that the IDF has been a constant and central presence in Israeli society for many years. Moreover, going back to the components of Israel's security culture, we find that because Israeli policymakers were predisposed to continually underscore Israel's vulnerability vis-à-vis its neighbors, the IDF's role was enhanced in this regard as well. The IDF was the embodiment of the answer to this vulnerability, the projection of military strength. It both reflected the security needs of the state, and provided the solutions. Finally, the IDF was highly instrumental in the early stages of the establishment of the Israeli state and society. Based on a general obligatory draft of both men and women 18 years of age (albeit with a number of exceptions), the IDF very much reflected the make-up of Israeli society; service in the army often had a "melting pot" effect, especially for new immigrants. Thus, in addition to its primary role of ensuring the security of the state, the IDF also assumed a central role in building up a cohesive society, by promoting integrative processes.

Still, does Israel meet the criteria that would lend support to its definition as a militaristic society? Researchers in Israel are split on this question. Uri Ben-Eliezer claims that from the mid-1930s a new dynamic began to develop in the Yishuv, that was militaristic in nature. In the beginning this was more of a complementary element to the more moderate positions adopted by the leadership of the Yishuv, but as time went on it became more and more characteristic of the policies themselves.[17] After the establishment of Israel, Ben-Eliezer notes that this militaristic ideology was the driving force behind the formation of a "nation in uniform," and became the center of its collective consciousness.[18] Baruch Kimmerling adds that Israeli militarism in fact became one of the central organizing principles of Israeli society.[19]

Yoram Peri provides a different perspective. Peri maintains that while there are clear militaristic elements in Israeli society, characterizing the society as a whole as militaristic would not be accurate. Although the IDF has assumed a prominent place with decision-making circles in Israel, an analysis of positions taken by high-ranking officers over the years in fact reveals a high level of *pluralism*.[20] Because the military itself includes people from most sectors of society, with a range of political views, it is not surprising that such a plurality of views has been identified. Moreover,

---

[14] The close ties between the civil and military realms in Israel are given most concrete expression by the fact that the "pool" for civilian leaders in Israel is very often ex-IDF (Israel Defense Forces) officers themselves.

[15] Yoram Peri (2002) *The Israeli Military and Israel's Palestinian Policy: From Oslo to the Al Aqsa Intifada* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace) p. 5.

[16] *Ibid,* p.11.

[17] Uri Ben-Eliezer (1995) *"Derech HaKavenet: Hivatzruto Shel HaMilitarism HaYisraeli, 1936-1956" (Through the Sight: The Development of Israeli Militarism, 1936-1956)* (Tel Aviv: Dvir) (Hebrew) pp. 10-11, 19.

[18] *Ibid,* p. 285.

[19] Baruch Kimmerling (1993) "Patterns of Militarism in Israel", *Archieve European Sociologie* vol. 34 (1993) p. 125.

[20] Yoram Peri (1996) "HaOmnam HaHevra HaYisraelit Militaristit?" ("Is Israeli Society Militaristic?") *Zemanim* vol. 56 (1996) pp. 105, 112 (Hebrew).

because of the mutual influences between the military and civilian sectors, coming from a military background does not necessarily mean that ex-military civilian leaders will be less willing to pursue peace options, as is clear from the cases of former prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, both ex-IDF generals who went far in their efforts to promote peace between Israel and its neighbors.

On a more general level, when dealing with the issue of civil-military relations in Israel, we again encounter the central role of security culture in Israeli society, although this time in the sense that both the military and society are recruited to the common goal of ensuring Israel's survival. Understanding the fact that military strength is viewed in the context of the need to address an ongoing sense of vulnerability explains why the closeness of relations does not in fact portend a danger of Israel adopting more hostile attitudes toward its neighbors. Moreover, the basis for these close ties is grounded in the prevailing acceptance on the part of significant sectors of Israeli society of the ongoing pre-eminence of security-related issues and the trust that the public has in the IDF as the primary guarantor of that security. There is little sense that the two are working at cross purposes or of the dangerous possibility of the military taking over the reigns of government and endangering democratic processes.

Nevertheless, it is not a healthy situation for a state when civilian and military personnel becoming virtually one and the same in terms of their approach to state leadership. The steady and growing presence of high-ranking ex-IDF officers and commanders within parliament and government is troubling in the sense that it only serves to reinforce the prominence of security thinking, and the security framing of the challenges that Israel faces. Moreover, the tendency to view and accept military leaders as the primary experts on security issues can potentially lead to situations in which the IDF gains undue influence over civilian decision-making, even when it does not have any real authority in this regard.[21]

---

[21] See, for example, a two-part series written by media commentator Ben Kaspit, to mark two years to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (September 2002). In one of the articles, Kaspit relates the story of former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's attempt to secure from the IDF a plan for withdrawal from South Lebanon. Then Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz opposed the idea of withdrawal, and according to Kaspit's account of the events, he simply stalled on the issue of producing operational plans to the prime minister until it was no longer relevant. Ben Kaspit, "Two Years to the Intifada" *Ma'ariv,* 6 and 13 September 2002 (Hebrew).

# Israel's current threat perceptions

When assessing Israel's place in the Middle East, we are confronted by a striking divergence between Israel's own threat perceptions, and the designs that are often attributed to it on the part of other regional states. Israel has a tendency to focus on its lack of acceptance in the region, and the threats to its survival that emanate from this basic state of affairs. Arab states, for their part, have increasingly come to attribute to Israel aggressive and expansionist regional hegemonic designs, primarily on the basis of their assessments of Israel's military capabilities and offensive initiatives. On the most basic level, there is a convergence between Israel and its neighbors on the view that Israel is in possession of overwhelming military, technological, and economic prowess; that Israel has, in fact, a (closely guarded) qualitative edge over the Arab states. The divergence is over the meaning that is attributed to this power – the context within which it is perceived to have been cultivated, and the role that is attributed to it within the state's overall security conception.

## *The cultural underpinnings of threat perceptions*

Obviously, it is quite commonplace in international relations to have one state's military power -- that it claims to have developed for *defensive* purposes only -- come to be perceived of as a *threat* by other states. Because intentions of the other side are difficult to assess with any degree of certainty, concerns over the assumed implications of perceived military capabilities are what feed the dynamics of the "security dilemma," and sustain arms races among states. In the case of Israel and its neighbors, however, this dynamic is greatly amplified, due to specific cultural factors that are at work on both sides, pulling it to the extremes. Understanding the cultural imperatives at work in this case is important, especially when seeking to prepare the ground for the establishment of cooperative regional security arrangements. Such efforts require states to be *reassured* about the intentions of others, and the first step on the road to reassurance is understanding.

The above discussion of Israel's security policy has underscored that military strength is perceived by Israel primarily in terms of the role that such power plays in ensuring the continued survival of the state. Israel's security ethos does not justify the use of overwhelming strength for the purpose of territorial occupation and expansion. Even when military force is employed offensively, it is always justified by its linkage to the sense of existing, impending, or virtually imminent aggression or attack. Far from having thoughts in the direction of regional hegemony, Israel's dominant approach has been focused on ensuring the existing status quo, meaning the insurance and maintenance of its continued survival in the region.

Turning to the Arab states, a frequently reiterated theme is that Israel's vast military capability supports a regime that ultimately seeks domination over the Arab world. It is interesting to note that such fears of Israel's hegemonic intentions in the region also lock into significant pre-existing cultural images and mindsets. Numerous statements and commentaries in the Arab press (especially since the late 1980s) refer to the threatening image of what has come to be known as Israel's "qualitative edge." The areas mentioned as comprising this Israeli advantage range from images of Israel's "long arm" that extends deep into the Arab world, through its overwhelming technological and economic prowess, to what is often considered to be the apex of Israel's edge: its non-conventional weapons capabilities, most significantly its arsenal of nuclear weapons. Incorporated into this image is the overwhelming support that Israel receives from the US.[22] In the first half of the 1990s, especially with regard to Shimon Peres's ideas regarding the New Middle East, there were many articles published in the Arab (most prominently Egyptian) press on Israel's economic superiority, and possible intentions of gaining through economic prowess what it had not been able to achieve militarily (i.e. regional hegemony). Israel's strategic ties with Turkey have also been woven into this overarching image of Israel's qualitative superiority over the Arab states.

---

[22] See Emily Landau (2001) *Egypt and Israel in ACRS: Bilateral Concerns in a Regional Arms Control Process*, Memorandum no. 59 (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies) p. 31. This idea was originally developed in Ariel E. Levite and Emily B. Landau (1994) "Israel's Contemporary Qualitative Security Edge in Arab Eyes" in Shlomo Gazit (ed.) (1994) *The Middle East Military Balance, 1993-94* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies).

This image locks into, and is fed by additional images of Israel that attribute to it Western colonialist designs. Israel has long been perceived by Arab states as an imperialistic phenomenon in the Middle East. A prominent Israeli scholar who focuses on Middle East studies, Emmanuel Sivan, writes about the "Crusader myth" that is prevalent in Arab society – a symbol of the inherent tendency of the West to dominate Arabs and Moslems throughout history. "According to Sivan, many books written by Arab scholars in the 1950s and 1960s viewed Israel as the modern manifestation of the Crusades – similar to the Crusader rule in Jerusalem both in terms of its strengths (technological superiority, Western assistance) and its vulnerabilities. These deeply rooted and enduring images of Israel are components of the cultural background that influence the assessment of Israel's present-day overwhelming qualitative edge. They are cultural resources that commentators and policy makers draw upon in their framing of the security implications of this situation."[23]

Thus, we find that both sides (Arab and Israel) are predisposed to view Israel's military strength in a *diametrically opposed manner,* which is likely to make finding common ground all the more difficult. On the one hand, realizing that threat perceptions are embedded in a cultural setting underscores the difficulties that will be encountered in any attempt to affect change. On the other hand, however, recognizing this cultural context can also enable policymakers who are interested in improving adversarial relations to address mutual concerns in a more informed manner, and perhaps avoid certain pitfalls in their dealings with each other.

### The Israeli threat perception – state-based threats

Turning to Israel's current threat perceptions, not surprisingly, Iran and Iraq are commonly referred to as the most dangerous state-based threats to Israel. This is due to their attributed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) development – which according to various documents and numerous Intelligence reports is at an advanced stage – as well as the uncertainty surrounding their intentions toward Israel. Anti-Israeli rhetoric in Iran, where Israel is normally referred to as the "Zionist entity", is most prevalent, and Iraq actually attacked Israeli population centres in the Second Gulf War. These threats lock into Israel's sense of vulnerability and fear of annihilation, especially as, in contrast to Syria, for example, where the parameters of peace talks are more or less in place, with regard to Iran and Iraq there is no clear "deal" that can lead to the establishment of peaceful relations. Thus, the perception of the threatening nature of these two states stretches deep into the future. Israeli security elites often highlight the potential existential threat that both states are perceived to pose to Israel.

The prospect of either Iran or Iraq (or both) attaining a nuclear weapons capability is particularly threatening to Israel, due to the difficulties in coping with nuclear threats. As already discussed, Israel's security culture typically required that when decision makers evaluated that a change had occurred which significantly increased the level of vulnerability, the tendency should be to consider some type of initiative in order to restore the status quo and to justify this as self-defense and future deterrence. From the early days of statehood, Israel's decision makers were particularly concerned with the possibility of the Middle East becoming nuclearized, as this would concretize the basic threat perception of impending annihilation. Israel hoped that development of a nuclear option would deter against *any* threat to its survival, conventional or non-conventional.

However, if another regional state actually *achieved* nuclear capability, this could seriously undermine Israel's deterrence in this regard. Thus, Israel continued to take the initiative when it believed it could prevent – or at least delay – a nuclear capability from developing, as in the case of Israel's 1981 attack on the "Osiraq" nuclear reactor in Iraq, just before it went critical. This kind of policy was in line with Israel's security culture, as it underscored strength and self-reliance. In the current international reality, however, Israel can no longer realistically follow this approach. Therefore, Israel will be left only with the option of deterrence. But, how will Israel's "insurance policy" work when there are multiple perceived nuclear powers in the region? Thus, even if the two states do not pose a direct and/or immediate WMD threat to Israel, in the sense of actual attack, the implications of this strategic development could be quite threatening to Israel's self-assured ability to ward off threats to its survival.

Understanding Israel's tendency to focus on Iran and Iraq as significant threats to its survival is important in an additional sense as well. When considering the prospects for establishing a

---

[23] Landau, *ibid,* p. 32. For the Crusader myth, see: Emmanuel Sivan (1988) *Arab Political Myths* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved) (Hebrew) chapter 1.

regional security regime in the Middle East, Israel will be likely to display strong resistance to any regional arrangement that does not take the implications of this potential threat into account. This is true both as far as the composition of the regional grouping itself, as well as the agenda of the talks themselves.

As to the framework for carrying out such talks – the specific group of states involved in the forum of discussions on regional security – Israel's focus on Iran and Iraq has implications, for example, in terms of whether such a framework can realistically be Mediterranean rather than Middle Eastern. While the Middle Eastern regional security talks that took place in the first half of the 1990s as part of the Madrid peace process admittedly moved forward without the participation of Iran and Iraq, it was clear that the goal was for these states to be integrated at a later stage, when conditions permitted. All Gulf states are considered part of the Middle East. In a very real sense, the Middle East constitutes a "regional security complex" along the lines of the definition provided by Ole Waever and Barry Buzan.[24] For Israel, the Middle East is its natural geographical and geostrategic setting. While this does not rule out a Mediterranean framework, it does mean that these factors will have to be seriously considered. Regarding the specific issues on the agenda of the talks, as hinted at earlier, Israel will be highly resistant to any attempt to directly target its nuclear deterrent as long as its sense of vulnerability remains strong. In this regard as well, relations with Iran and Iraq are a central concern. If Iran and/or Iraq actually become nuclear states, the imperative to deal with this threat in a regional framework will increase dramatically, and Israel will find itself much more dependent on regional arrangements for its security.

## Israeli security perceptions: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Israel is of course most concerned at present with the Palestinian threat, especially since the outbreak of violence in September 2000. The nature of the threat is ongoing terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers within Israel, in the context of the armed struggle between the two sides. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often referred to as the core conflict in the Middle East. As far as the nature and extent of the violence being employed, while extremely troubling to Israel – both in terms of the population and its leaders – it is not considered to be an existential threat to the state.

There are, however, elements of the conflict that do arouse Israel's deeper sensitivities and fears for survival. These relate first and foremost to the events that preceded the outbreak of violence: the Camp David talks of summer 2000. As far as the Camp David talks are concerned, and without going into the details of the offer put to the Yasser Arafat, or the conditions influencing his ability to accept it, many Israelis began to question whether they had not in fact been following an illusion. There was a sense that in their earnest quest for peace, those who had been working for this deal may have been ignoring what seemed to emerge so starkly from the failed talks: that the Palestinians (and the Arabs more generally speaking) would never fully reconcile themselves to Israel's ongoing presence in the region.

The turn to violence, which began two months later with the start of the *Intifada*, was interpreted as an intentional choice of violence over non-violent means for achieving political aims. Thus, the choice of violence signified not only a rejection of the offer of Camp David, but a rejection of the diplomatic path more generally. These feelings were underscored in December 2000 and January 2001, with the Palestinian non-acceptance of the Clinton proposal, and the failed Taba negotiations. They are also provided with a measure of confirmation when viewed in light of positions that continue to be voiced by the more radical Palestinian organizations, primarily Hamas. Leaders that continue to state that they will not end their struggle until they have regained all the land that was taken in 1948 feed Israeli fears and insecurities. This also explains Israel's particular sensitivity to the issue of right of return of refugees. Israel needs to be reassured on these points, because if the conflict becomes framed as one that in fact poses a threat to the existence of the state, reaching a settlement will be correspondingly more difficult.

---

[24]  According to Waever and Buzan, the central argument in security complex theory is that "security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes." They note that "[s]ecurity interdependence is more intense between actors inside such complexes than it is between actors inside the complex and those outside it." Ole Waever and Barry Buzan (2000) "An Inter-Regional Analysis: NATO's New Strategic Concept and the Theory of Security Complexes" in Sven Behrendt and Christian-Peter Hanelt (eds.) (2000) *Bound to Cooperate – Europe and the Middle East* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation Publishers) p. 57.

Finally, Israel's vulnerability with regard to the armed conflict with the Palestinians is also revealed in light of the fact that its ability to deter violence is in this case severely limited. Its ultimate nuclear deterrent is clearly ineffective in this scenario, as Palestinian commentaries are quick to point out.[25] In fact, when addressing the Arab world, Palestinians have often highlighted their struggle as the only one capable of "overcoming" Israel's overwhelming military strength. As far as conventional responses are concerned, these have not brought about an end to the terrorist attacks, and Israel faces ongoing charges of "excessive use of force" from the international community in this asymmetric warfare.

---

[25]  A particularly succinct caricature from the first *Intifada* of the late 1980s depicts the familiar sign for nuclear (the interlocking rings), but with a *rock* as its nucleus. The message was that the rock used by youths in the uprising was more powerful than Israel's assumed nuclear weapons, showing the ineffectiveness of nuclear deterrence in struggles that are carried out beneath the nuclear threshold.

# The Roles of Europe, the US and the EMP in Israel's Security Thinking

Finally, we come to the topic of the role of various third parties – such as the European Union and the United States – or frameworks – the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) – in Israel's security thinking. Earlier on it was noted that Israel had overall a tendency to prefer unilateral solutions to its security problems, as a function of the principle of self-reliance. There are, however, limits to its ability to maintain such a self-reliant approach, and Israel has turned to other states for assistance over the years. It has also accepted the mediation efforts of third parties, especially the United States, when it has entered into peace negotiations with its neighbours.

The closest bilateral relationship that Israel has developed and cultivated over the years has been with the United States.[26] The United States is a strong strategic ally and recent years have seen numerous dialogues and agreements between the two states that have served to enhance these relations. They have underscored the ongoing American commitment to maintaining Israel's strategic edge, and ensuring its continued survival in the region. Israel views American support as an essential factor underpinning its ability to maintain the necessary military strength to pose a credible deterrent to its adversaries. The depth and breadth of American-Israeli relations exceeds what Israel has with any other state, and Israel regards them as most important strategically.

Relations with Europe over the years have been much less smooth. While relations with France were important in the early years of statehood, since the late 1960s Europe on the whole has come to be viewed with a fair degree of suspicion, especially in light of certain pro-Arab tendencies that Israel has identified at various junctures during the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Venice declaration of 1980 was particularly detrimental in this regard,[27] and Israel remains quite hesitant as far as dealing with the EU on political and security issues, or putting its trust in mediation efforts on the part of EU organizations.[28] While these are not rejected out of hand, Israel has a more guarded attitude, especially when these are offered as an alternative to US efforts.

Beyond the question of Israel's specific relationship with each of these entities on the bilateral level, the United States and the EU – and the ideas incorporated in the EMP – are also representative of two very different approaches to the question of security. A significant feature of American as "enhancer" of Israel's security is the fact that it has made a *bilateral* commitment to Israel, with a bilateral dynamic. While the United States did pursue a multilateral road to security in the Middle East in the context of the Madrid peace process, its approach was very much step-by-step, taking the national security concerns of the parties most seriously. The idea behind Confidence and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) – which were the primary measures discussed in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group of the multilateral track of Madrid – was in fact that the most productive way to move forward was by dealing in the initial stage with those aspects of inter-state relations that were *not* conceived as posing a threat to core security concerns. Only when a measure of confidence in the ability to correctly discern intentions of the other side was achieved, would the parties be able to advance to additional areas of concern.

---

[26] For analyses of the special relationship between the US and Israel, see among others, Bernard Reich (1977) *Quest for Peace: United States-Israel Relations and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books); William Quandt (1977) *Decade of Decisions: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967*-1976 (Berkeley: University of California Press); Gabriel Sheffer (1987) "The United States-Israeli 'Special Relationship'" *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* (9:4, Dec 1987); and Abraham Ben-Zvi (1993) *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (NY: Columbia University Press).

[27] According to Joseph Alpher, the gap between the European and Israeli approach to the Middle East peace process "commences most emphatically with the Venice Declaration of June 12-13, 1980…" when the European Council stated its support, among other things, for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people including the right to self-determination. Joseph Alpher (1998) "The Political Role of the EU in the Middle East: Israeli Aspirations" in Sven Behrendt and Christian-Peter Hanelt (eds.) (1998) *The Political Role of the European Union in the Middle East* (Munich: Gutersloh) p. 73.

[28] The situation is quite different as far as economic relations are concerned. In the economic realm the opportunities for fruitful cooperation are apparent to both sides, as is most apparent from the Association Agreement that came into force in June 2000.

Thus, Israel did not fear that its vital security interests were in danger of being compromised at a premature stage.

The EMP potential road to the enhancement of Israel's security, on the other hand, while perhaps incorporating some of the same measures discussed in ACRS, would be based a more developed conception of how security works in the multilateral framework. In contrast to the US, the EU speaks of a new conception of security, emanating from the EU's multilateral experience, that is regarded very much as an alternative to traditional power politics. In the view being promoted in the EMP, security is necessarily a function of, and flows from integrative inter-state processes. It is these processes that foster and propagate common practices which in turn engender stability. Israel took its very first steps in the direction of multilateral Middle Eastern security dynamics in the context of ACRS, and found that many of its worst fears were not born out. In fact, the advantages of the multilateral dynamic became apparent, and Israel was willing to proceed with CSBMs. However, while initial gains in the multilateral setting were made, it is far from being perceived as an alternative route to Israel's security. At best, it is viewed at present as a potentially helpful supplement.

In the case of the EMP, there is the additional above-mentioned consideration that it focuses on the Mediterranean rather than the Middle East. There is also the issue of Europe assuming the role of facilitator/partner in this process. First of all, as noted, Israel has its doubts over the EU as the most qualified party to take on the role of helping to create a more stable security environment for Middle Eastern states. An additional consideration is that it is not entirely clear (on the part of the EU itself) whether the major thrust of its effort is in the direction of facilitating a Southern Mediterranean cooperative process, or in fact promoting a real partnership between North and South. Elements of both aims are apparent, but there are serious deficiencies regarding each as well; this lack of clarity regarding purpose is the source of some confusion, which breeds a measure of skepticism and even suspicion.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, regarding each of the topics discussed in this paper, we have seen that the attempt to understand Israel's security concerns, calculations, and policies, is enhanced when the prevailing cultural context is taken into account. How a particular situation is read, and the development of possible means for dealing with it, are both processes that take place within a particular social context, where seemingly "objective" realities take on certain meanings for decision-makers.

On the practical level, recognition of the significance of the cultural context may seem at first daunting to those working to promote change, due to the sense that the enduring quality of these factors will be difficult to surmount. However, acceptance of the fact that social context matters, and that common understandings have an impact on behavior, can also help efforts in the direction of peace and regional security. Exposing culturally based fears and insecurities is the first step on the road to addressing them through processes of reassurance. Such reassurance and confidence building needs to go beyond the actions of states, and the weapons systems they possess, to the cultural basis that gives these actions and weapons *meaning* in international relations.

## EuroMeSCo Papers

**1**
Volker Perthes, *Germany and the EuroMediterranean Partnership: Gradually Becoming a Mediterranean State*, February 1998. (Available also in French)

**2**
May Chartouni-Dubarry, *Les processus de transition politique au Proche-Orient*, septembre 1998.

**3**
Alfred Tovias, *Israel and the Barcelona Process*, October 1998.

**4**
George Joffé, *Foreign Investment and the Rule of Law*, March 1999.

**5**
Azzem Mahjoub et Hafedh Zaafrane, *La zone de libre-échange euro-méditerranéenne*, mars 1999.

**6**
Gema Martin Muñoz, *Réforme politique et changements sociaux : l'exemple des pays du Maghreb*, avril 1999.

**7**
Roberto Aliboni, *Building Blocks for the Euro-Med Charter on Peace and Stability*, January 2000. (Available also in French)

**8**
M. Fatih Tayfur, *Turkish Perceptions of the Mediterranean*, March 2000.

**9**
George Joffé, *International Implications of Domestic Security*, April 2000.

**10**
Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, *La politique de visas dans l'espace euro-méditerranéen*, avril 2000.

**11**
Elvira Sánchez Mateos, *The Antipersonnel Landmines Issue in the Mediterranean*, April 2000.

**12**
May Chartouni-Dubarry, *Complementarity between the European Union and the United States in the Middle East Peace Process: Implications for the EMP*, avril 2000. (Available also in French)

**13**
Álvaro de Vasconcelos, *Intégration et coopération sous-régionale en Méditerranée*, avril 2000.

**14**

Ayman Abdel Nour, *Syrian Views of an Association Agreement with the European Union*, December 2001.

**15**

Ulrike Julia Reinhardt, *Civil Society Co-operation in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: From Declarations to Practice*, May 2002.

**16**

IEEI/CIDOB/GERM, *European Defence – Perceptions and Realities, Working Group III First Year Report*, June 2002.

**17**

IAI/AEI, *Security and Common Ground in the Euro-Med Partnership, Working Group I First Year Report*, June 2002.

**18**

MEDAC/JCSS, *Sub-Regional Cooperation within the EMP, Working Group IV First Year Report*, July 2002.

**19**

Erwan Lannon, *Parlements et société civile dans la sécurité euro-méditerranéenne*, November 2002.

**20**

Bichara Khader, *Eastern Enlargement and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: A Win-Win Game?*, February 2003.

**21**

Emily Landau and Tamar Malz, *Culture and Security Police in Israel*, March 2003.