

CHAPTER ONE

National Cohesion in Tough Times





Israel is a strong country and its strategic position is better than ever. Nevertheless, Israel still faces significant security challenges.

Primary among the growing challenges are the hegemonic ambitions of Iran which seeks nuclear weapons, alongside attendant threats to Israel's civilian home front from the Iranian regime and its proxies. In addition, for the foreseeable future, Israel faces a violent and intractable conflict with the Palestinians. Therefore, Israel must always be ready for war. This is the ultimate test for Israeli society, too.

Therefore, the most important challenge facing any government in Israel is nurturing cohesion in Israeli society; ensuring unity in the face of tests that may be posed to Israel by the violent Mideast environment. Such cohesion is important even at times of calm, due to its role in deterring Israel's enemies.

Deterrence is based not only on sheer military might, but on the country's willingness to use force when necessary; and above all, on the capacity to bear loss and pain both at the frontlines and on the home front.

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Since peace for Israel is not yet around the corner, Israel's ability to present effective responses at times of crisis is crucially influenced by the level of cohesiveness among varied components of Israeli society. Deep social or political cleavages, or a disconnect between political and military echelons (or between both and public sentiments) undermine the effective implementation of national policy. Such divisions only subvert morale, undercut the authority of elected officials, and weaken resolve of the home front when under fire. This may encourage the enemy to attack.



The recent history of Israel stands as a warning against military and diplomatic wild adventures which were, perhaps, successful in the short-term but soon led to deep social fissures; to deep scars which have yet to heal.

Cases in point: The launch of the First Lebanon War in 1982, which at first was broadly backed by the public but soon gradually lost almost all support; the Oslo Accords, which from the start were extraordinarily divisive and became ever more bitterly contested following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; and the disengagement from Gaza and northern Samaria in 2005.

In our view, these political cleavages (which some have termed a division into separate “tribes”) do not overwhelm the basic bonds of solidarity which continue to characterize Israeli society. In fact, the persistence of centrist impulses in Israeli politics indicates wide common denominators.

In the security realm, broad public support for Operation Protective Edge in 2014 serves as proof that national cohesion does exist, particularly when the going gets tough and the public senses that there is no alternative to war. (More than 85% of the public backed that military campaign.)

Such Israeli national cohesion must be preserved – even at the expense of adopting some constraints on the government’s freedom of action, and even curtailing some military operations in order to maintain internal (and international) legitimacy.

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Of course, the counter argument is that bold military and diplomatic initiatives aimed at changing problematic realities always require a shattering of consensus and the taking of dramatic risks. This is true, but very high-risk military operations, dicey diplomatic gambles, and ambitious territorial changes are worth attempting only if they are likely to reap overwhelming strategic rewards.

However, no such grand strategic rewards are to be found in Israel’s medium-term future, from any ambitious schemes. Specifically, unilateral Israeli withdrawals in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) will not enhance Israel’s security nor improve its international standing.

The fact is that Israeli withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza only perpetuated, and even exacerbated, conflict between Israel and its neighbors. Unilateral withdrawals in Judea and Samaria could lead to Hamas dominance in these areas. Moreover, such withdrawals would only whet Palestinian appetites for more concessions, while dangerously deepening the divisions within Israeli society.

Instead, what can the Israeli government do to nurture cohesion?

- » After the intemperate election campaigns of 2019, the government and opposition must restore restraint in public discourse and avoid demonization of political rivals.
- » Israel’s response to the Trump administration’s upcoming peace initiative should be designed to reflect the basic principle of preserving national cohesion. This means hewing to policies that enjoy nearly universal support within Israeli society.
- » Unilateral withdrawals that would deepen divisions in society should not be contemplated.



- » Building in Judea and Samaria should be restrained, maintaining the present territorial footprint – the contours of which are generally within an Israeli consensus. On the other hand, many more homes should be built in and around Jerusalem to strengthen Israel's hold on the broad Jerusalem envelope which lies at the heart of Israeli national consensus.
- » The conflict with the Palestinians should be carefully “managed” (as explained below).
- » Military force should be employed cautiously and undertaken only as a last resort.
- » The government should prepare the home front to withstand a missile war.

