Restoring the Zionist Iron Wall

written by David M. Weinberg | 14.01.2024

Defense analysts rightly have been focused in recent weeks on how to restore security for Israel on the tactical level. This includes how to topple Hamas rule in Gaza, destroy its weapons production infrastructure and military capabilities, establish a broad security perimeter along the entire length of the Gaza-Israel and Gaza-Egypt border, ensure long-term demilitarization of Gaza as much as possible, and prevent a Hamas build-up in Judea and Samaria.Diplomatic analysts rightly have been focused in recent weeks on durable arrangements for Palestinian life in the territories. This includes administrative models for Gaza involving international supervision and better Palestinian self-government in parts of Judea and Samaria, alongside more decisive Israeli control of key strategic passages and territories. Perhaps long-term enhanced "diplomatic horizon" for peaceful Palestinian entities alongside Israel, too.

None of this has much grounding in reality unless Israel (and the international community) assimilates how many faulty security paradigms and erroneous patterns of diplomacy were shattered on October 7. The Simchat Torah massacres by Hamas wiped-out layers upon layers of conventional wisdom. They must now change the way in which Israelis think about themselves and their path forward.

One of the first thinkers to take a deep dive into these questions is Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen, who over 42 years in the IDF always served as an out-of-the-box thinker with an ideological-philosophical bent.

In a 7,600-word, three-part essay published this month by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Hacohen first examines the roots of Israeli failure on October 7 and Israel's perception of the struggle on the opposing side. Then he outlines ways in which Israeli security doctrines need to evolve in response to enemy plans for ongoing war.

Finally, and most importantly, Hacohen offers components of national vision and renewed ideological-theological principles of action that will anchor the existence of the State of Israel securely into the future.

Underlying Hacohen's weltanschauung is the notion of ongoing struggle, and deep faith in the righteousness of the Jewish return to Zion. He wants Israel to

return the roots of Zionism, to classic Zionist discourse on pioneering, redemption, and settlement – taking themes from the dynamic worldviews of Berl Katznelson and Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook. And in bedrock security terms, he calls for a return to the "Iron Wall" concept articulated by Zeev Jabotinsky and advocated by David Ben Gurion.

General Hacohen begins by explaining that Israel and international observers have misread the map of regional security threats and enemy goals. They believed that in the era of peace with Egypt and Jordan, and with the collapse of Syria's army in the civil war, the era of threats from state armies had ended; and that the remaining threats from terrorist organizations did not pose an existential threat to the State of Israel. On Oct. 7, Israel received a painful wake-up call that this was a dangerously wrong assessment. Combined with the threat from Hezbollah in Lebanon, terrorist organizations now represent an overarching regional threat.

Furthermore, many argued that economic development and prosperity for the Palestinians were the key to achieving stability and peace. However, Hamas conduct is not guided by Palestinian economic wellbeing but rather by cosmic, annihilationist rationale. Its "resistance" against Zionism expresses a religious-nationalist struggle with enduring motivational roots.

"It is not economic hardship, poverty, and despair that generates Arab terrorism, but hope; hope and faith that Zionist dominance can be consistently challenged and weakened until its ultimate demise." Therefore, Israel must fight to prove to the radical Islamist butchers "that their time has not come, that the gates of jihadist heaven have not opened before them."

In the second part of Hacohen's treatise, he explains that for Israel the world of warfare has changed completely. The enemy has formulated a concept of warfare based on dense defensive lines containing obstacles and explosives, both above and below ground, in the heart of built-up areas in cities and villages where fighters/terrorists blend into the local (and supposedly "uninvolved") population. This makes rapid IDF advance into enemy territory an extraordinarily complex task, and guts the longstanding Israeli war strategy for swift, decisive victories.

In the third and most innovative-reflective part of his essay, Hacohen argues for a return to the Iron Wall concept; the negating of Arab genocidal aspirations against Israel by rock solid defense and constant offensive advances by Israel.

Critical components in re-reconstruction of the Iron Wall necessarily include rehabilitation of the communities damaged in Hamas' October attack and the return of Israeli residents to the Galilee too. This involves far more than simple renovation and construction; it is nothing less than national repair and renaissance. It is the ultimate form of resistance against Palestinian terrorism, and the highest expression of Zionist optimism and fortitude.

Hacohen quotes Ben-Gurion on the sources of strength for victory in 1948: "We reached victory through three paths: the path of faith, the path of pioneering creativity, and the path of suffering."

Hacohen also takes pages from General Moshe Dayan's existential philosophy of struggle. In 1969, Dayan said that "Rest and heritage are longed-for aspirations for us, not realities. And if we occasionally achieve them, they are only short intermediate stations – aspirations for the continuation of endless struggle."

"The only basic answer we can give to the question 'what will be' is – we will continue to fight, just as we did in the past, and now too. The answer to the question 'what will be' must focus on our ability to withstand difficulties, our ability to cope – more than on absolute and final solutions to our problems. We must prepare ourselves mentally and physically for a prolonged process of struggle."

Hacohen points out that these sentiments clash with those expressed by Israeli leadership in recent decades. For instance, in a speech at the UN, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett chose to emphasize something much softer: "What Israelis want is a good life for themselves and their families and a rosy future for their children."

Hacohen's stark and dark self-conception of a nation at war in endless struggle against Arab-Islamist jihadists, is sobering. Not easy to stomach. But Hacohen argues that reorienting Israeli society in this way is necessary, and that it requires renewed spiritual-ideological commitment.

"The Zionist narrative and success manifests itself in all practical simplicity by demonstrating a readiness to fight without hesitation and without time-limit to defend the people and the country. This is Zionism's major historical revolution."

It is the Zionist movement's central and greatest achievement, especially since the other promises of Zionism (to end global antisemitism, and to physically

protect Jews from persecution around the world) haven't quite panned out. After all, "the movement that was supposed to solve antisemitism has instead generated, over the past two decades, a new and equally dangerous form of it, in the guise of anti-Zionism."

One can even argue, writes Hacohen, that Israel's independence and military strength has achieved nothing more than to replace one existential problem, like pogroms in Kishinev, with another existential problem, like the Iranian nuclear threat that threatens Tel Aviv or the Simchat Torah massacre in the northwestern Negev. The enormous historical difference is the Jewish People's ability to fight back; to resist its enemies forcefully.

Therefore, Israel cannot make do with post-October 7 investigative committees tasked with returning to familiar tracks of tight defensive posture. "That would be making only technical repairs and escaping the magnitude of repair truly required. Israeli leadership, and the defense establishment, must be committed to reformulating Israel's national security concept; indeed, to reasserting Israel's identity as a nation at justified abiding war."

In my view, Hacohen's analysis is accurate but stops short in assessing the possibilities for a better Middle East. It is Israel's steadfast struggle, its willingness to combat radical Islam, its necessary and probable military victories, the sacrifices of its brave young men and the stamina of its civilians – that will bring regional peace; that will draw the Saudis and other Arabs into open partnership with Israel and eventually squash or sideline regional jihadists.

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