



A Historic Opportunity to Return to Israel's Realist National Security Doctrine

The Strategic Consequences of Departing from Realism: How Ideological Drift Undermined Israel's Security and Why a Return to Foundational Principles Is Essential

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IDF tanks in training, 2023 (Photo: Elyasaf Jehuda)

Main Points:

- For its first four decades, Israel's realist security doctrine transformed it from a small, threatened community into a powerful state with defensible borders. Its decisive victories led to the removal of existential threats, brought it to regional power status, and made it an asset for the United States.



- The principles of this doctrine are: understanding the root of the conflict as hostility toward Jewish sovereignty, maintaining an offensive and initiative-based approach that emphasizes controlling territory, and self-reliance.
- From the late 1980's on however, these principles were abandoned in favor of an idealist doctrine which called for peace with undefeated enemies, a defensive posture after unilateral withdrawals, and an increased reliance on international actors.
- The policies that resulted led Israel's security into a downward spiral in which the hope for peace led to withdrawals, which caused a loss of deterrence, emboldening its enemies, and triggering renewed attacks.
- The end result was a situation in which Israel was surrounded from north and south by terrorist armies, capable both of raining missiles across the country and of conventional invasion, while Iran steadily progressed toward nuclear weapons, crossing every red line set by Israel.
- The Iron Swords War clearly exposed the costs of abandoning the realist doctrine and reaffirmed its relevance. The re-implementation of some of its principles has already begun, and the question is whether Israel will succeed in embedding them permanently in the current era.

Introduction

In 1957, Moshe Sharett described the debate between two competing approaches to Israeli strategy as follows:

“One approach says that the Arabs understand only the language of force... The State of Israel must, from time to time, demonstrate clearly that it is strong, and that it is capable of and ready to use force in a decisive and highly effective way. If it fails to demonstrate this, it will be swallowed up – – it may be wiped off the face of the earth. As for peace, this approach says, it is doubtful in any case; in any event, it is very far off. If peace ever comes, it will come only when they are convinced that this state cannot be defeated...”

“The other approach says that the issue of peace must never disappear from our considerations, not even for a moment. This is not only a political calculation; in the long run, it is a decisive security consideration. Without diminishing the importance



of day-to-day security concerns, we must always take the question of peace into account in our overall calculations. We must restrain our responses.”¹

Since then, the two approaches described by Sharett have continued to coexist within Israel’s leadership, one dominating at first and later the other.² A birds-eye view of Israel’s 77 years shows that the first approach prevailed during the country’s first four decades, from Ben-Gurion to Begin, while the second became dominant from the 1990s and early 2000s. Israel’s policies during this second period, shaped its security environment since then, up to the outbreak of the Iron Swords War. It is possible that the current war will mark a turning point, leading Israel to again adopt an unabashed realist doctrine looking forward.

The realist national security doctrine, inspired by Jabotinsky and shaped under Ben-Gurion’s leadership, had numerous practical aspects, but it can be boiled down to three fundamental principles. By the mid-1980s, adherence to these principles guided Israel from an extremely perilous existence in its initial years, to a stable security situation and the elimination of all immediate existential threats.

The Foundational Principles of the Realist Doctrine

The root of the conflict – This principle holds that Arab/Muslim hostility stems from opposition to the idea of Jewish sovereignty in any borders and therefore cannot be appeased through compromise; only power and decisive victory can ensure Israel’s survival. Ben-Gurion adopted this insight from Jabotinsky, who as early as the 1920s asserted that Israel’s security would be achieved only through a long-term strategy that would compel the Arab world to come to terms with its existence.³ In Jabotinsky’s time, this view stood in contrast to the

¹ Benny Morris, [“Moshe Sharett against the Security Establishment,”](#) *The Moshe Sharett Heritage Site*, 1996 [Hebrew].

² Raphael BenLevi, *Cultures of Counterproliferation: The Making of US and Israeli Policy on Iran's Nuclear Program*. (Routledge, 2024), p.69-102; Uri Bar-Joseph, "The paradox of Israeli power." *Survival* 46, no. 4 (2004), p.149.

³ Zeev Jabotinsky, “The Iron Wall,” *Razsviet*, 1923.



prevailing belief that economic prosperity would lead the Arabs to reconcile with Jewish national aspirations to sovereignty.⁴

Tactical offense and initiative – Israel's highest aim has always been to protect its population from threats, not territorial expansionism for its own sake. However, it sought to do so through a tactically offensive doctrine of warfare that included preventive and preemptive operations, punitive actions, alongside the seizure of strategic territory. As a corollary, Israel strove to win its wars quickly and to transfer the warfighting onto enemy territory as soon as possible.⁵ This principle also dictated maintaining a large ground army capable of maneuver as the military's center of gravity, while the air force's role was to enable it to conquer territory by achieving air superiority.

Self-Reliance – This principle asserts that Israel alone is responsible for its own security and must not rely on foreign forces to fight on its behalf. It must also strive for maximum independence in its defense industry. The principle stemmed largely from the lessons of the Holocaust, which made clear that the nations of the world could not be depended on to defend the Jews.⁶ From this understanding also grew Israel's nuclear project as the ultimate deterrent against existential threats.⁷

Self-reliance does not preclude cooperation with a global power; rather, it emphasizes that Israel's willingness and ability to fight independently are what make it a desirable and valuable ally for a great power with interests in the Middle East.⁸ Support from a great power does not mean obeying blindly to all its preferences, but rather identifying its broader interests and assisting them while advancing Israel's own goals, and being prepared to act unilaterally in cases of supreme national interest.

⁴ For more information on these debates see: Anita Shapira, *Land and power: The Zionist resort to force, 1881-1948*. (Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁵ Ariel Levite, *Offense and Defense in Israeli Military Doctrine* (Routledge, 2020), p.25.

⁶ Eliot A. Cohen, Michael J. Eisenstadt, and Andrew J. Bacevich. "Israel's Revolution in Security Affairs," *Survival* 40, no. 1 (1998): 48-67.

⁷ Raphael BenLevi, "The Evolution and Future of Israeli Nuclear Ambiguity" *The Nonproliferation Review*, 29(4-6), 243-265.

⁸ Efraim Inbar, *Israel's National Security: Issues and Challenges since the Yom Kippur War* (Routledge, 2007), p.86.



Thus, the pre-state Jewish community cooperated with Britain against the Ottoman Empire in World War I and against the Germans during World War II; received critical arms shipments from the Soviet Union via Czechoslovakia in 1948, who hoped Israel would join the Soviet bloc; cooperated with France in the 1950s against their shared pan-Arabist foes in Egypt and North Africa; and, finally, since 1968, built an alliance with the United States, based on its strategic value in the context of the Cold War.

Although this doctrine was dominant during Ben-Gurion's time, voices of opposition were present as a minority, the most prominent among them being Moshe Sharett. Sharett, together with individuals from *Mapai*, *Ahdut Ha'Avoda*, and *Mapam*, rejected its three core principles. He believed that the Arab-Israeli conflict could be resolved in the near term not through the build-up of military power but rather through its limitation and proposed relying on external powers to restrain Arab hostility. Sharett sought to conduct dialogue with Egypt in exchange for American territorial guarantees, and opposed the reprisal operations of the 1950s, the Sinai Campaign in 1956, and the Israeli nuclear project.⁹

The Results of Implementing the Realist Doctrine: A Secure and Victorious Israel

Generally speaking, the realist doctrine guided Israel from the War of Independence until after the First Lebanon War and served it well, one by one removing its enemies' will to continue fighting against it.

During the War of Independence, as the British Mandate neared its end in May 1948, the Jewish community launched *Plan D*, aimed at seizing strategic areas, opening supply routes to Jerusalem, and defeating local Arab forces who operated against Jewish settlements.¹⁰ The successes of this series of operations in the six-weeks leading up to the end of the mandate and the declaration of

⁹ Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 1998), p.48; See also: Gabriel Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett: Biography of a Political Moderate*, (Clarendon Press, 1996), p.808-856.

¹⁰ Benny Morris, *1948. A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, Yale University Press, 2008.



independence were critical in attaining territorial continuity and control over key areas, which allowed the Yishuv to withstand the invasion by Arab armies which immediately followed.

In the years that followed, Israel continued to shape its borders with the understanding that it had the right – and the necessity – to control them, so as to establish defensible borders and ensure the survival of the Zionist project for Jewish national independence.

During the 1956 Sinai Campaign, Israel acted with initiative to change the dire security reality vis-à-vis Egypt and the Gaza Strip, while aligning itself with the shared interests of France and Britain. Against the backdrop of cross-border terror attacks from Gaza against Jewish communities, the closure of the Straits of Tiran by Egypt, and the latter's growing military strength, Israel's ground forces captured the entire Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip.

By these actions, Israel demonstrated its capability as a maneuverable military force, granting it a decade of deterrence. Although Israel eventually withdrew from the Sinai under American pressure, it secured commitments for the demilitarization of the peninsula and its freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran. These commitments provided a political and legal basis for Israel's claim that the blockade of the Straits in May 1967 constituted a *casus belli* leading up to the Six-Day War.

The unequivocal victory in the Six-Day War, in which Israel once again applied an offensive doctrine to shape its borders, together with the "Black September" crisis in 1970 – during which Israel threatened to act against Syria if it invaded Jordan – led to Jordan's abandoning its state of belligerency against Israel in favor of covert alliance, and therefore it refrained from participation in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Israel's newfound control over the Judea and Samaria mountain ridge, the Jordan Valley, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, fundamentally altered its strategic situation. The success of its military capabilities also decisively



influenced the perception of Israel in Washington, which from then on viewed it as a strategic asset worth supporting, rather than a liability destined for defeat.¹¹

In the Yom Kippur War, Israel refrained from a preemptive strike and paid a heavy price for it; however, its rapid recovery and renewed application of the realist doctrine by turning the tables and nearly invading Damascus and Cairo, turned the war into a military victory, which later translated into Egypt's removal from the list of actively belligerent states. The development of Israel's nuclear capabilities also contributed to Egypt's decision to end the state of hostility.¹²

The First Lebanon War in 1982 is remembered in public memory as less glorious, yet in reality, within two months it succeeded in expelling the PLO leadership and its fighters from southern Lebanon, distancing them from the region, and ending their bombardments on northern Israel.

In addition, Israel's victorious battles against the Syrian Air Force in Lebanon created a lasting deterrence against Syria, which had hitherto been preparing for a larger war against Israel, even without Egypt's participation. The continued Israeli presence in the South Lebanon security zone kept Hezbollah as a hunted guerrilla organization, preventing it from developing into a terrorist army.¹³

Along with Israel's strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, the implementation of the realist doctrine transformed Israel from a small, threatened community into a powerful state with defensible borders, eliminating existential threats from Egypt, Jordan, the PLO, Syria, and Iraq. When it took the initiative, Israel won its wars quickly and decisively. This string of victories turned it into an asset in the eyes of the United States and led to increased American support, even though in most of these cases, Israel acted without Washington's approval – and often contrary to its preferences.

¹¹ Michael Oren, *Power, Faith and Fantasy* (Norton, 2007), p. 530.

¹² Emmanuel Navon, *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel* (Jewish Publication Society, 2020), p. 188.

¹³ Raphael BenLevi, "Is War with Lebanon Imminent?" *Mosaic Magazine*, April 2024. See also: Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Israeli decision to withdraw from Southern Lebanon: Political leadership and security policy", *Political Science Quarterly* 117: 4 (2002), p. 567.



The Rise of the Idealist Doctrine

The great success of the realist doctrine in removing existential threats opened the door for some members of Israel's leadership to question the continued validity of its principles. The tendency to drift toward idealism during times of prosperity is a well-known historical phenomenon, and poses a challenge for any affluent society, particularly when several generations have not experienced war. Idealist voices always existed in Israel, but until this point, they never decisively influenced critical decisions. Toward the end of the 1980s, the foundational principles gradually eroded, until these voices rose to leadership and began acting according to opposing principles:

The conflict can be resolved through compromise and economic prosperity – Contrary to the realist principle that views wars as a constant of the human condition, the idea emerged that with the end of the Cold War a new historical period without major wars had begun.¹⁴ Echoing the position against which Jabotinsky argued, Shimon Peres claimed that economic prosperity is more important than military strength for achieving security, and that poverty is the root of the spread of Islamist extremism across Arab society. Accordingly, security would be achieved by improving economic conditions in the region, particularly among the Arabs of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza.¹⁵

Defense as a strategic principle and territory as a liability – Based on the belief that major wars were a thing of the past, the idea emerged that technology has made control of territory less essential. While technological superiority was always important in Israel's security doctrine, it was never previously considered a substitute for control of strategic territory. It was now argued that holding territory is unnecessary military and even a diplomatic liability, and that security can be achieved only within borders agreed upon by Israelis and Arabs. Additionally, it was claimed that in asymmetric wars achieving decisive victory is impossible, since the state actor is at an inherent disadvantage against non-

¹⁴ Inbar, p.88.

¹⁵ Shimon Peres and Arye Naor, *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1993), p.100.



state actors.¹⁶ Accordingly, defensive measures, which in the past were meant to enable offensive action, became a central strategic principle, and air power came to be seen as a possible substitute for ground forces.¹⁷

Reliance on international forces, the international community, and international law – Contrary to the principle of self-reliance, Israel's willingness to entrust the guarding of its security interests to foreign actors increased. It was argued that new threats, such as missiles from distant countries, require international cooperation and even collective security arrangements.¹⁸ Accordingly, Israel entrusted the newly founded Palestinian Authority (PA) to act against terrorism in Judea, Samaria and Gaza in the 1990s, relied on UNIFIL in Southern Lebanon to ensure the demilitarization of Hezbollah in the 2000s, and requested that the international community– primarily the U.S. and Europe– lead the effort against Iran's nuclear program.¹⁹ The erosion of the principle of self-reliance was also reflected in the reduction of domestic defense production capabilities and the closure of munition production lines throughout the 2000s.

Concurrently, during these years there was an unprecedented integration of international law considerations into security matters. Although Israel has never ignored international law, its original approach was utilitarian: it sought to show on the international stage how its actions were justified by international law. Since the 1990s, considerations from international humanitarian law (IHL) have been institutionally integrated into the IDF, and the approach shifted from utilitarian to one based on the inherent value of these considerations.

This development reflects the growing influence of the judiciary and legal advisors across the government in Israel during this period. In particular, since 2000, the International Law Division of the IDF ("DABLA") expanded its authority to provide operational legal advice to units in the field, embedding a

¹⁶ Charles D. Freilich, "Why Can't Israel Win Wars Any More?" *Survival* 57, no.2 (2015):79-92.

¹⁷ Dan Meridor and Ron Eldadi, "Israel's National Security Doctrine: The Report of the Committee on the Formulation of the National Security Doctrine (Meridor Committee), Ten Years Later" *INSS*, Feb. 2019.

¹⁸ Inbar, p.97.

¹⁹ Raphael BenLevi, "From supporting actor to 'whipping the P5+ 1': Assessing material and ideational influences on Israeli Policy toward the Iranian nuclear program (1996–2015)," *Comparative Strategy*, 40(6), (2021) 563-584.



restrictive interpretation of legal considerations into operational activity.²⁰ At the same time, the Israeli Supreme Court's intervention in national security matters increased, based on the view that such involvement is necessary to protect Israel from lawsuits in international legal fora.

The Results of the Idealist Doctrine: Israel Surrounded by Existential Threats

Since the end of the First Lebanon War, Israel entered what can be called a strategic tailspin: the hope for peace led to withdrawals, which undermined deterrence and emboldened its enemies, who then triggered renewed attacks – creating pressure for further withdrawals and additional encouragement for the adversary. This spiral reached its peak in the deadliest terrorist attack in Israel's history on October 7th, 2023.

The 1985 Jibril Agreement can be seen as the beginning of this spiral,²¹ when Israel released over a thousand terrorists in exchange for three soldiers. Many of these individuals, who were released into Judea, Samaria and Gaza came to form the leading instigators of the First Intifada, including Ahmed Yassin, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, who upon his return founded the Hamas movement.

The First Intifada convinced the architects of the Oslo Accords that Israel needed to bring Yasser Arafat back from Tunisia in order to appoint the PLO as the governing authority over the Arabs of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. Under the agreements, Israel relinquished security control over Area A, hoping that the PA would prevent terrorism from these areas.

In practice, Arafat, in coordination with Hamas, exercised behind-the-scenes control over the terror campaigns of the 1990s.²² This wave, along with PM Ehud Barak's hopes of ending the conflict through broad concessions to Arafat,

²⁰ Amichai Cohen & Stuart A. Cohen, "Israel and International Humanitarian Law: Between the Neo-Realism of State Security and the Soft Power of Legal Acceptability." *Israel Studies* 16, no. 2 (2011), p.6.

²¹ Moshe Ya'alon, *The Longer, Shorter Path*, (Gefen Publishing House, 2019), Chp. 2.

²² Ya'alon, Chp. 7.



encouraged him to order the rushed unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in the spring of 2000 in preparation for the Camp David talks.²³

The withdrawal from Lebanon encouraged Arafat to launch a new wave of attacks– the Second Intifada– just five months later, and this wave created the pressure that contributed to PM Ariel Sharon’s decision to withdraw from Gaza in 2004. In the past, territorial concessions were made only as part of a formal peace agreement or with security guarantees and some significant diplomatic achievement, such as the withdrawal from Sinai in the context of the peace agreement with Egypt, the demilitarization of the peninsula and the establishment of the American observation force there.

And even so, the Sinai desert constitutes a vast geographic barrier between Israel and Egypt’s population and military centers, in stark contrast with Southern Lebanon, whose border overlooks dozens of Israeli communities, and the Judea and Samaria mountain range, and the Gaza Strip.

In the later withdrawals, these territories were abandoned to terrorist organizations without any political achievement and without establishing adequate security mechanisms, while Israel’s political and military leadership assumed it could retreat behind new borders, build walls and fences, and rely on technological defenses. It hoped to gain international legitimacy to act decisively against any future provocation, because now it could not be accused of being in a state of “occupation.”

At the same time, the assumption that the threat of a conventional invasion of Israel had essentially disappeared led the transforming of the IDF into a “small and smart army”– with an emphasis on advanced technologies, virtual command and control systems, ballistic missile defense, reliance on the air force and intelligence, and the use of precision–guided missiles– eliminating the need for a large, maneuverable ground force.²⁴ The reduction of ground forces further

²³ Raphael BenLevi, “[Deadly Illusions: Reassessing Israel’s Military History in Lebanon](#),” *Hashiloach Frontlines*, December 2023.

²⁴ Efraim Karsh, “From Oslo to Be’eri: how the 30-years-long peace delusion led to Hamas’s 10/7 massacres.” *Israel Affairs* 30, no. 5 (2024), p.10.



reinforced the withdrawal process and, after the severe downsizing, made it difficult to even consider reoccupying these territories.

The combination of these trends was most evident in the Second Lebanon War, which can be understood as the testing ground for the new combat doctrine – air power as primary, ground forces as secondary. The war ended without a clear victory, as Hezbollah continued firing missiles until the last day. Israel allowed an international force to oversee the demilitarization of Hezbollah, which never materialized, and instead oversaw its enormous build up over the next decade.

Although Israel caused significant damage to infrastructure in Lebanon and to Hezbollah, ultimately Iran's position in the region was strengthened, and Hezbollah consolidated its role as a powerful actor in Lebanon. The war affirmed Iran's ability to project influence out to the Mediterranean coast and cemented its status as a key regional power. At the same time, Iran continued to enrich uranium while Israel worked to delay it through covert operations, relying on the nations of the world to lead the opposition.²⁵

This created a situation in which Israel was surrounded from north and south by terror armies, capable both of raining missiles across the country and of conventional invasion, while Iran steadily progressed toward nuclear weapons, crossing every red line set by Israel. On the eve of October 7, the IDF had no operational plans to conquer Gaza, and neither the armament stockpiles nor domestic industrial capacity sufficient for a prolonged campaign.

During this period, Israel occasionally acted to halt the downward spiral: it mitigated some of the worst consequences of the Area A withdrawals during Operation Defensive Shield (2002), struck the Syrian nuclear reactor (2007), and, starting in 2009 built an operationally ready plan to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, nearly executing it in 2012. Nevertheless, the clear trend persisted: whenever Israel hesitated, abandoned territory, adopted defensive measures, and acted reactively without striving for decisive victory, its strategic position deteriorated.

²⁵ BenLevi, 2024, p.133.



Is Israel Returning to the Realist Doctrine?

The Iron Swords War clearly exposed the costs of abandoning the realist doctrine and reaffirmed its relevance. The re-implementation of some of its principles has already begun, and the question is whether Israel will succeed in embedding them permanently in the current era.

The root of the conflict – Today it is clearer than ever that the root of the conflict is not territorial but a radical rejection of the Zionist idea by its enemies. This is certainly true with respect to Hamas – which has shown that economic prosperity does not lead it to moderation – and is largely true as well for the Arabs of Judea and Samaria and the leadership of the PA. Therefore, the objective should be how to defeat their ambition to annihilate the State of Israel: to break the will to continue their century-long war against Jewish sovereignty in the land. It is clear that continued PA rule in Judea and Samaria will not bring the deep change required. The challenge is great, but only if we understand the problem correctly can we begin to formulate feasible ways to confront it.

Tactical offense and initiative – In many of the war-fronts, Israel has made significant achievements, adopting proactive offensive action and the seizure of territory: the operation against Hezbollah in October 2024 and the continued actions and control of strategic positions in Lebanon; the destruction of the Syrian army's capabilities within days in December 2024 and the creation of a buffer zone; Operation Rising Lion against Iran; and the strike against the Hamas leadership in Qatar – all of these indicate a return to the realist doctrine.

The challenge in the long term will be to continue to act decisively to prevent Hezbollah's re-emergence and to preserve control of the strategic areas in Lebanon and Syria in the face of expected pressures. This while actively preparing for a preemptive strike against Iran at the first opportunity that it should prove necessary. Israel must also be vigilant in keeping the threat from the Houthis at a minimum by proactively preventing them from rebuilding or expanding capabilities.

The situation in the Gaza arena is mixed: during the past two years of fighting the IDF did not pursue a rapid decisive victory and for most of this time did not



act to seize control of territory. This is primarily a result of the fact that it attempted to pressure Hamas into releasing the hostages, and not simply conquering Hamas. But it is also a result of the fact that the IDF had not planned or built its force for such a war, nor did the General Staff believe in the strategy of conquering territory, but rather remained in the predominant mindset that strategic outcomes can be achieved with special forces and air power. As of the time of writing, the war objectives in Gaza have not yet been fully achieved, and the question of whether Israel will remain determined to prevent Hamas from being a military or governing force remains open.

Self-Reliance – The gap between the IDF's needs in this war and its stockpiles of munitions and production capacity demonstrated how necessary the rehabilitation of the defense industry is, and the process of rebuilding has already begun. In the first year and a half of the war, Israel faced pressure from the Biden administration to refrain from expanding its operations in Gaza and other arenas, and instead to settle for very partial gains.

Nevertheless, the determination of Israel's leadership to fundamentally change its security situation and to upend the pro-Iranian balance of power in the Middle East, has made it an indispensable power that the region must reckon with and an even greater asset to the United States. The challenge before Israel is now to reshape the relationship with Washington in order to reflect this new reality of Israel as an essential U.S. partner. Again, the first test will be in Gaza: will Israel itself oversee the dismantling of Hamas and prevent its return to power, or will it delegate this task to foreign forces?

Over the past hundred years, Israel has transformed from a small community under British rule into a leading regional power. A bird's-eye view shows how adherence to the realist doctrine led to this achievement, while its abandonment resulted in the entire Zionist enterprise facing the threat of annihilation on October 7.

The renewed adoption of its core principles is not a matter of choice but the only way to ensure Israel's existence and prosperity for the coming decades. The Iron Swords War has given us the opportunity to reverse the trends that led us toward



disaster, and history will judge whether we were wise enough to internalize this lesson and act accordingly.

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