Israel's Security: Another Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the Realist school of thought as inadequate to account for the origin of Israeli security mindset. Notwithstanding the bifurcation view among decision makers with regard to the best approach to security, the prevailing opinion remains similar to that formed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Evidently, the Israeli perspective on security and survival issues, like all states, is shaped through and filtered by a series of visions which determine its approach to foreign policy. Jewishness and Zionism remain the key lenses through which Israelis, on the whole, perceive external perils.

Integral to the understanding of Israeli security culture is the argument that in many cases threat is socially constructed. Hence, nothing less than tearing the state down and explaining its uniqueness will provide a full appreciation of Israel's approach to security. Constructivism, which argues that interests and identity are socially constructed rather than given, provides a rather significant complementary approach for a more thorough comprehension of Israeli's approach to security.


INTRODUCTION

Concepts and analytical insights derived from Realism, a seminal International Relations (IR) paradigm, are often employed by strategists and analysts to account for the Israeli approach to national security. Notwithstanding the temptation of this approach, this paper discusses the assumption that to fully appreciate Israel's security policies; another alternative perspective, namely constructivism, offers a complementary, yet significant, explanation of the behavior of sovereign states, notably with regard to explaining the origins of important systemic changes (Mercer, 1995: 233). Short of rejecting realism, the constructivist school of thought addresses more acutely the methods and rationale behind the creation and maintenance of specific security threats as perceived by Israel. Indeed, it is through Israel's foreign policy formation, and principally through its approach to national security, that one can uncover its respective shaping of subjective "reality" and the resulting attitudes adopted towards what the Israeli people collectively perceive as a series of sympathetic or unsympathetic environments. It is therefore evident that the state's identity and culture, as derived from inherent cognitive and motivational biases, clarifies the Israeli conception of security.

This three-part paper presents an alternative approach to understanding why Israel behaves as it does regarding security. The debate among different IR paradigms regarding security is presented in the first section. Section two addresses the issue of construction of menace. The Israeli case is presented in section three.

The Conceptual Framework

Why do states behave the way they do? Why do they adopt a particular position over another? The answer to this question frames the debate among different schools of International Relations. Neorealists attribute state action to the structure or the distribution of power in an anarchic international system. On the whole, Neorealists argue that anarchy (the absence of a universal central body that could enforce law and compel states to resolve their disagreements peacefully) is the underlying reality of international politics (Waltz). Hence, for a state to survive in this environment, it should seek power and rely on itself. Furthermore, realists argue that short of taking into account the anarchical structure of the system, no complete analysis of international politics is possible. Conversely, liberals reflect more optimism. Where they

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acknowledge that the international system is anarchic, they tend to downplay the importance of this structure. They see the state system as fashioned from institutions and processes and that the history of world politics is not only of conflict but also of cooperation. Their criticism to the realist theory is that overemphasizing the security dilemma and viewing the world as nothing but a series of conflicts is a distortion of reality.

Both realists and liberals, however, are committed to a rationalist view of the differences that the structure makes – it changes behavior but not identities and interests (Jepperson et al., 1996:44). Both paradigms, by definition, deem the effect of the cultural environment on the construction of a given nation's 'self' minimal; indeed, the two branches of the classical school of international relations theory hold as inherent a state actor's characteristics. According to realists, therefore, self-interest and preservation determine states' actions, with self-reliance serving as the point of departure for all theoretical discourse. Liberals counter that the anarchic structure itself can foster multilateral collaboration, but has little ability to affect the accepted identities and interests of state actors.

From the constructivist point of view, the classicists' doer assessment of world affairs as governed by power politics and self-reliance fails to hit the mark. Anarchy, constructivists assert, is not the result of Hobbesian international competition, but it's rather a social construction: we created it, and thus we can change it. In Wendt's words: 'if states find themselves in a self-help system, this is because their practices made it that way. Changing the practices will change the intersubjective knowledge that constitutes the system.' (Wendt, 1992:407).

It must be stated that constructivism is far from a monolithic theory; like all schools of thought, it is constituted by varying themes and diverging opinions. What binds constructivists together as a school of thought is the shared belief in the constructed (hence 'constructivism') character of social reality and the rejection of the 'naturalization' of concepts. The center of attention remains identity and interest-formation as part of international relations. That is, constructivism investigates how knowledgeable practices constitute subjects who possess a cognitive, intersubjective conception of process in which identities and interests are endogenous to interaction, rather than a rationalist-behavioral one in which they are exogenous (Wendt, 1992:394). In this manner, the primary dispute between the realist and the constructivist schools is demonstrated: realists regard actors' preferences as exogenously determined inputs; constructivists, in contrast, maintain that actors' preferences are the focus of the analysis, and are thus endogenously determined outcomes: interests define identity which determines action. Focusing their research on this concept, constructivists promote the importance of culture and identity for comprehension of the international system.

Far from being exclusively materially-driven or based on military and economic capacities, the security environments in which states are placed comprise prominent cultural and institutional dimensions; the latter affect not only the motivations for the different types of state behavior but also the basic character of states: identity (Jepperson et al., 1996:33).

Intersubjectivity is a structural phenomenon wherein the actions of individuals in a social group reciprocally influence one another's future actions; in the realm of international relations, the outcome of this form of interaction can ultimately contribute to a problem of security, or conversely to its prevention or solution. Intersubjectivity holds that a rational actor's objectives should only be acknowledged if they are common to the group as a whole (for example, the state), and this understanding plays a central role in the conception of constructivism. Constructivists envision actors' behavior not as the result of realist 'self-reliance' motivation, but as the logical, conditioned outcome of the mutual constitution of agent and structure, where the structure influences and is influenced by the actions of the agent.

From this, one can glean that the process of intersubjective, mutual constitution of identity and the perceptions held of others' identities contributes appreciably to the creation of national policy, including, significantly, security policy. Actions, behavior, and characteristics are thus derived from the collaborative process of identity formation, which in turn is determined by, and cyclically helps determine, the relevant climate and context of a given set of relationships.

The identity that states project, and the interests that they pursue, is in this manner constructed by their environments (Jepperson et al., 1996:42). Paramount to comprehending a state's behavior and the decisions of its policy-makers vis-à-vis others is the awareness of that state's self-identity, not that identity which is perceived by others, but how the state is conceived by those
determining the course of action to be taken by the state. The exploitation of identity by policy-makers, once the process of creation of the national identity has subconsciously, and often consciously, reached its nexus; provides control of security policy direction: once a state has determined who and what it is, it is in the hands of national leaders to defend that self-image by any necessary means. It is, therefore, necessary to focus attention on this process of mutually constituted identities and the intersubjectivity that is both an input and an outcome of this process as it pertains to the international system. It resulted from an analysis of this process that constructivists believe that positive change in the system can occur: the prescription of actions based on identity can be altered if the basis of identity-formation is changed.

Construction of the Menace

Constructivists, relying on the aforementioned notion of intersubjectivity, submit that the menace is not inherent to the system, but is rather created by interactions within the system. In light of this conclusion, it becomes clear that the anti-cooperative spirit seemingly endemic in the international system arises not out of the nature of international relations but out of the meanings and biases contributed to the system by the actors themselves: no actor is innately driven to competition; it is competition which is driven into the actors. One of the elementary principles of constructivism is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them (Wendt, 1992:396). Thus, the fact that a state treats another like its foe does not emanate from a simple rational calculation, but from collective meaningful intersubjective understandings and expectations that give specific meaning to material forces and so determine the behaviors of agents (Jepperson et al., 1996:38).

With identity as the basis for national security policy formation, it is clear that the menace is constructed out of a self-image of being at risk: a cornered animal is a dangerous animal. An identity thus constructed will give rise to foreign policies aimed at maintaining security and preservation not of the state, but of identity, which is after all the self as perceived by the majority. Those touting aggressive defensive or offensive postures are heralded as recognizing the sanctity of the state and as appropriately shaping security policy in this regard. This self-reinforcing process helps put in place the notion that security is identity, and that national interests revolve around maintaining both.

Consequently, the concept of security will differ in the extent to which and the manner in which the self is identified cognitively with 'the other.' (Wendt, 1992:399). Every relationship on the world stage will be marked by the evaluation of the other as a friend or foe, and relations will be adjusted accordingly. More than the balance of power, the "balance of threats" would be more suitable to explain states’ actions, threats being socially constructed (Wendt, 1992:396). States are more concerned with the survival of their material sub-state agency, including their intrinsic capabilities; the process by which the conception of self evolves will, therefore, specify the meanings and requirements of survival (Wendt, 1992:402). Seminal to the analysis of security policy, this notion introduces both a fluctuation and an evolution in relations between or among states. The constructivist school provides reasons for optimism with regard to transformation of relationships; by defining the link between identity formation and foreign and security policy formulation, thereby shedding light on an otherwise overlooked aspect of national security.

The Israeli Case

As a result of the unrivalled attention devoted to issues of security, the development of a "security culture" has been noted by scholars as a uniquely identifiable aspect of Israeli identity. In fact, from the perspective of both the national psyche and government affairs, the subject of security takes a considerable and central place in a manner that makes Israeli’s concerns about defense unique among democratic countries (Pedatzur, 2003).

Integral to the understanding of the Israeli psyche is the realization of how the important motifs that constitute Israeli’s 'security culture' are considerably influenced by historical and cultural features. The term security culture is defined here as the 'dominant social construct or frame which provides the parameters within which a state's security 'reality' is discussed, debated and constructed.' (Landau and Malz, 2003). The term culture may be understood as 'the collective meanings and understandings that social groups create, share and symbolically express.' (Aronoff and Aronoff, 1996).

The genesis of the Israeli position on security and the perception of threats, and how these policies and beliefs have been nurtured over the decades since Israel’s creation is of fundamental importance in any study of
Israeli foreign policy. The answers to underlying questions about the events, conditions and patterns of interaction can be found in Israeli decision-makers’ beliefs about the world and their images of others, increasingly so if they are shared by the Israeli community at large. The struggle for establishing the state and its aftermath, coupled with the way in which geopolitical events were interpreted by Israeli leaders in the first years after statehood, were largely responsible for the concept of security which prevails in Israel today. Its founding in the middle of what was perceived to be a hostile region, as well as the continued antagonism it has sensed and which has been displayed by the Arab world, has instilled in Israelis a hardened but increasingly familiar feeling of besiegement, whether actual or perceived. As a result, Israel has embraced security policies which fall into the realist school; self-reliance, deterrence and the maintenance of military status quo (or more accurately, the maintenance of a strategic advantage) have marked Israel’s regional relations for years. These deep-seated and ingrained policies, long linked to Israel's security, are sure to mark relations with other Middle Eastern states for the foreseeable future.

It is important to note that while this has been the dominant trend in Israeli security policy, there is, and has been, a divergent view among decision-makers regarding the best approach to security policy and Middle Eastern relations. The prevailing opinion remains similar to that formed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but challenges to that opinion have led to historical shifts in policy, most notably in the 1990s. These challenges, notwithstanding what follows, describe the trend in security policy formation for the state of Israel based on the realist paradigm, and filtered through the lens of Israeli self-identity. The Israeli perspective on security and survival issues, like all states, is shaped through and filtered by a series of lenses which determine its approach to foreign policy (Reich, 2001: 122).

**The Jewish-Zionist Lenses**

Israel shares with all states a concern regarding its survival and security. What is unique about the Israeli case is that whereas most nations were not founded under duress, Israel came into existence already burdened by years of threats to its security because of its expansionist nature.

The dominant lens by virtue of its existence as a Jewish state is the religious lens, one which frames Jewish history in the context of actual Jewish political and social concerns. As a pre-eminent aspect of political culture, Israel's Jewishness 'pervades thought, feeling, belief and behavior in the political realm.' (Brecher, 1972:229). Fundamental shaping events in Jewish history through the ages have for many a negative connotation, so much so that some say that 'Israel’s policy is conditioned by its view of Jewish history as a history of negatives' (Reich, 2001:122). In light of this, the foundation of Israel as a Jewish state constitutes a deviation from a perceived history of negative experiences: the creation of the state of Israel was, for the Jewish Diaspora, an overwhelmingly positive event. The pre-existing identity of Jews formed out from their perceived history of a succession of injurious events has had an impact on the recollection of the history of the state of Israel since independence.

The mutual animosity felt between Israel and its neighbors, and the resulting perception of threat have in large part shaped Israeli identity which, constructivists hold, has set the course for Israel's formulation of national security. On the micro-level, the shared siege mentality that has shaped national identity has influenced the opinions and voting habits of a sizeable portion of the Israeli population.

Milestones in Israeli history are wars waged with its Arab neighbors over the perception of threats to its survival. This method of marking history by battles with neighbors serves to reinforce constantly in the Israeli mind the ongoing turmoil between Jews and Arabs and further delays peace and cooperation between the two Semitic peoples. The Israeli sense of isolation, victimization and insecurity felt as a result of constructing its identity as one Jewish state against many Arab antagonists is compounded by the historical self-perception of Israel as 'a nation that dwells alone (Reich, 2001:123).(*)

Simply put, “the state was made by and for the Jewish people” (Brecher, 1972:231). Israeli political elite made innumerable foreign policy decisions based on their

(*) Expression taken from the Bible, Numbers 23: 9: ‘Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.’ This precept legitimizes the isolation and separation of Israel from the mainstream of the international community and is reflected in the modern history of Israel’s position in the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as its exclusion from Arab-dominated regional organizations.
concern for the protection of the collective sense of Jewish values, and the preservation of the well-being of Jews elsewhere, and took actions on behalf of Jews all over the world as long as Israel's national interests were not sacrificed. The case of the welfare of Soviet Jewry is a primary example of what Israel considers as a national interest as well as a vital interest of the entire Jewish community (Brecher, 1972:236). Israel’s driving motivation, however, and its primary preoccupation is the survival and enhancement of the Jewish homeland.

An extension of the first lens, the second prism of interpretation is Zionism. Israel is the creation of Zionism as described and defined by Theodor Herzl (Reich, 2001:123). Zionism emerged as an answer to anti-Semitism and the failure of assimilation in Europe, which made Jews feel insecure yet unique. The predominant concepts that form the Zionist lens are the overriding belief in a link between ancient and modern Israel, and the frequent reference to the return to sovereignty of the Jewish homeland. Its core myths of Exile and Redemption grants categories for conceiving the world’s order and offers a key scenario for instituting social actions, namely through the ingathering of the exiles (Aronoff and Aronoff, 1996:85). Stressing the Holocaust, another negative event in Jewish history, as the most demonstrable example of the need for a Jewish homeland, the Zionist lens provides the ‘legitimacy’ of Israel’s creation as a means for protecting Jewish rights and interests. The Holocaust acquired such magnitude in the formation of Israeli identity itself that Prime Minister Ben Gurion did not hesitate, at the time of the Eichmann Case, (Brecher, 1972:240) (*) to link the fate of Jews everywhere to the consciousness of Israeli youth who were not aware of the Holocaust; by insisting that the main point in this affair was to reveal the atrocities and the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime against the Jewish people.

Since the first Jewish settlements were established in Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th century, Zionism has dominated Israeli political discourse and culture, bolstered by varying interpretations of Zionism's ideology: this in turn made it the prominent theme first in Jewish and then in Israeli security; the quest was not merely for a Jewish state but, more importantly, for a secure, sovereign Jewish state where Jews all over the world could seek refuge from persecution, real or perceived. The Zionist line of discourse continues today, as is evident in the belief that 'Zionism was and remains today the ideology of the state with which an overwhelming majority of Israelis (Jews) identify (Aronoff and Aronoff, 1996:85). While there have been multiple, varying interpretations, reinterperations and modifications to the Zionist lens over time, its core beliefs remain unchanged: above all else, it promotes the continued existence of a Jewish state. Against this backdrop, one can understand Sharon's disengagement plan.

[The Israeli Construction of Threat]

The Formative Years

In order to understand fully the Israeli conception of security and the security culture which has arisen over the course of time, it is necessary to examine the pre-state years. Indeed, the prevailing notion of security, which helped shape the new Jewish-Israeli identity in that early period, was closely related to the notion of self-respect. The new state-entity was primarily concerned with projecting the 'image of a new, proud and strong Jewish people (Landau and Malz, 2003:7). The creation of a Jewish state, and the answer to the Jewish Question, was possible through the cultural embodiment of confidence theretofore lacking in Jewish identity. The legitimacy of Jews’ claim to ‘their’ land was averred confidently, with Biblical texts and Zionist beliefs cited as evidence. The dominant motifs embedded into the idea of security and self-respect were ‘a nation that stands alone,’ ‘few against many,’ fear of annihilation, self-reliance, strength, determination and initiative (Landau and Malz, 2003:7). By co-opting the negative, and boasting the positive aspects of this burgeoning Zionist/Israeli culture, Jewish leaders promoted a new national identity that was the basis for the establishment of national security culture; identity and security were, for Jews, inextricably linked based on the realist principles of self-reliance and competition.

(*) The Adolf Eichmann Trial was the object of extraordinary attention in the world press. After his abdication in Argentina by members of the Israel Security Service in 1960, who formally violated Argentine Law by doing so, the accused was however charged, under Israeli law, of being one of those responsible for the murder of millions of Jews in European countries during the period of Nazi rule, and therefore being liable to death according to the Israeli Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law, 5710-1950. Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion even evoked the supreme moral validity of this act to justify the outstanding procedures of these events.
To grasp their powerful meaning, the emerging principles illustrated by the above citations can be divided into two categories. The first three phrases (‘a nation that stands alone’, ‘few against many’, and ‘fear of annihilation’) can be seen as emphasizing the perceived vulnerability of the new state and of the identity and culture itself; the remaining phrases (self-reliance, strength, and determination) are the converse, conveying strength, and can be described as the response to the perception of vulnerability. This seemingly contradictory set of phrases showcases the duality that describes Israeli identity and security: offensive actions were/are seen as necessary for the defense of the state and its identity. The initiation of conflict as a means of defensive security so as to maintain the status quo assures Israeli survival. Besieged as it may be, Israel perceived that strength and power were essential in order to counter the extreme sense of vulnerability it felt and to preserve its territorial gains (Landau and Malz, 2003:7). As Israel forged its identity, it was forming its impression of others: the awareness and perception of threats led Israelis to construct identities for their neighbors based on generalizations about behavior and intentions; these generalizations would become the foundation for legitimating political actions.

What began first and foremost as a defensive security posture, aimed at the preservation of Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine progressively gave rise to a new offensive aspect to Israeli security culture. This combined offensive-defensive security culture became increasingly more appealing over the next decade, but with the withdrawal of British authority, and troops’ questions and uncertainties centering on the very survival of the Jewish community in Israel rendered this dichotomous, seemingly contradictory security policy permanent. This policy shift is evident in the increased military preparedness and the inclusion of the civilian rear in security efforts, as well as the construction of a solid national conception (collective meaning) based on national values and principles (Landau and Malz, 2003:8). These new elements in Israeli security culture would become the basis for what today describes the state’s conceptions of appropriate reaction to threats and challenges.

The First Years of Statehood

The 1948 War and the experiences in the years that followed confirmed in the minds of Israelis that the process of security policy formulation that had begun more than thirty years prior had been a just and righteous course; it furthermore gave Israel's new leaders a cause to project this security culture forward into the future. Zionism, or more broadly, Jewish nationalism, has dominated the thinking surrounding security policy-making, and has been coupled with specific aspects of the realist paradigm. The 'prophetic' fulfillment of one of Zionism's primary objectives, that is, the creation of a Jewish homeland in Israel, imbued the new Israelis with a sense of divine sanction and convinced them that they were indeed taking part in the first stages of a messianic mission to return the Chosen People to what they saw as their historical/Biblical home.

What can be called a fanatical focus on national security in the guise of national defense policy was really only demonstrated to the world after the creation of the Israeli state, and with it the Israelis broadcast their own perception of themselves and their fledgling nation. This declaration of identity was spurred on by the identification of two types of threats. The first was the 'basic' threat of a 'second round' of war (Landau and Malz, 2003:8). Operating under the belief that, following their defeat in the 1948 War, Arabs and Arab states would never accept the presence of a Jewish state in Palestine nor recognize the sovereign state of Israel, Israeli security/defense policy was constructed largely to withstand another war with its neighbors. Put differently, Israel would come to always fear a “next round” with one or more Arab states, which implied keeping a state of high and ongoing military readiness (Heller, 2000:11). Lingering hostilities from Arabs, and generally antagonistic relations with Arab states was implicit in all considerations of the future. These threats were used as justifications for the decisions to engage in preventative and preemptive wars, embraced as legitimate and necessary for the survival of the state, and became the basis for the perception of a menace to the very existence of Israel.

The second type of threat, considered to be the most pressing threat to the day-to-day security of the Israeli state, is infiltrations by Palestinians who sought to retrieve their property after being expelled by the Israeli forces in the 1948 war and border incidents. The response to successive incidents of this type has been one of the worst-case scenarios wherein Israel has gone on the counterattack, instituting often escalated acts of reprisal (Landau and Malz, 2003:8).
Two central principles of Israel’s security culture emerged from these offensive-defensive years: deterrence and self-reliance (Landau and Malz, 2003:8). Both reflect the Israeli adoption of the realist point of view regarding its environment. Their reliance on these concepts frames the way Israel has constructed threat, particularly the belief that the relationship between Israel and its neighbors must be based almost exclusively on military force (Pedatzur, 2003). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the perception that an attack, any organized attack, by one of its Arab adversaries constitutes a menace to the existence of the state of Israel catalyzed a security policy based on deterrence. For Israel, this existential threat was a justification for and legitimation of pre-emptive attacks against any perceived threats by its neighbors to the well-being of the state.

The manifestation of this policy placed heavy emphasis on the offensive aspect of national defense. Through the use of aggressive deterrence, Israel hoped to demonstrate its strategic military advantage and to plant permanently in the minds of its adversaries real or perceived, the awareness that engaging in war would at the very best result in a Pyrrhic victory, and more likely would be an extremely costly loss. The message was simple: Israel would show no restraint in its response to an attack, and the use of force would be overwhelming. An examination of the Israeli psyche demonstrates, however, that the policy of deterrence was rooted in the Jewish identity constructed around the perception of history as a string of negative events; pre-emptive strikes against its neighbors were thus a means of preventing a failure of deterrence, while legitimizing in Israeli thought the initiation of violence whenever a threat was perceived. Thus, the acute sense of vulnerability (external threat to its survival) demanded a suitable answer in order to assure that this threat would by no means become real (Landau and Malz, 2003:9).

The second principle, self-reliance, is bound up in Zionist mythology, and took a central place in the early stages of the drive to create a sovereign Jewish state. Of utmost significance, according to Zionist thought, was ensuring the autonomous existence of Israel. This manifested itself as a feeling of responsibility for creating a powerful military force to address its security affairs and defense needs that answered to no one but Israel. Partly in response to the anti-Semitic myth of the Jew as a cowardly weakling and partly out of its perception of rejection and hostility from its neighbors, Israel’s reaction was to improve access to its own means of defense in order to guarantee its ongoing survival; this strong position of self-reliance also endorsed the maintenance of overwhelming military strength in relation to its neighbors (Landau and Malz, 2003:9). Far from being the opinion of a vocal minority, the majority of Israelis embraced the belief in the necessity to exercise, for the preservation of the Jewish state, what academicians ascribe to realism; the two-fold security and defense policy of deterrence and self-reliance were deemed sufficient and appropriate for all threats.

In addition to perceived and real threats, Israeli security policy in the early years was driven by the supposition that strategic advantage lay with the Arabs, and thus steps were taken to create a balance of power more conducive to Israel's survival. Three important steps were taken: first, Israel attempted to increase its economic and demographic capital by drawing on the Jewish Diaspora as a whole; second, existing resources were mobilized in an intensive and increasingly more effective capacity vis-à-vis its enemies; finally, qualitatively superior military technology, organization and combat doctrine were promoted as necessary to overcome threats to the sanctity of Israel (Heller, 2000:11).

The Fragmentation of Policy Consensus

The approach to national security described above has not, however, gone unchallenged by dissenting opinions within Israel's borders. Indeed, the national consensus created by the notion that the nation was under genuine threat which in turn kept at bay internal challenges to the prevailing security doctrine has come to an end. Since 1967, there have been varying opinions of the role deterrence should play in security, and further questions and debate regarding the rise of settlements in what would later be called the Occupied Territories. Since the end of the war, the classical threat to survival ceased to have a unifying impact on Israeli society: the major source of threat came to be perceived differently by conflicting political parties (Aronoff and Aronoff, 1996:86). Israel's identity was challenged from within, as a result of domestic social and political upheavals, which redefined the image of Israel projected to others.

First, Israeli self-identity was amended by the rise of elements of mysticism and millenarianism. Far from the rather gloomy outlook of the history of the Jews as being a series of successive, negative events, a feeling of
euphoria and delight swept the country following its swift victory in the 1967 war. The sense of dread was replaced, almost overnight, by one of deliverance (Heller, 2000:36). The relative ease of victory reinforced the vision of a messianic mission sanctioned by a higher authority. This same belief was for many the ideological justification for the expansion of the burgeoning settlement movement, as it remains for many to this day. For the first time, Israelis perceived themselves as having a choice—the military victory had secured the luxury of a mitigated approach to security in the minds of some, while others saw it as their God-given obligation to push onward. The resultant split introduced questions into the cultural/ideological orientation that had theretofore been almost overnight, by one of deliverance (Heller, 2000:36). While the Ben Gurionist conceptualization of security continued to, dominate political, and particularly security, discourse, there were for the first time sectors of the Israeli population that no longer subscribed to, and in fact openly challenged the legitimacy of the "No Choice" platform upon which the state's identity and its security policy had been built.

Outcomes: Current Perspective

Echoing concerns of the past, current Israeli understanding of menace exists on two levels: the state-based threat, and the security concern stemming from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The perception of a state-based threat to Israel's security has centered predominantly on Iraq and Iran. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Israel has regarded these two states, each possessing unknown quantities of weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, and less likely in the case of these two nations, nuclear weapons), as having a tenuous relationship with Israel. The prospect for peace with each state is not in the offing, an argument supported by the anti-Israeli rhetoric occasionally issuing from their respective leaders. In response to the perception of the threat of WMD deployments against it, Israel is reported to have acquired its own nuclear arsenal. Based on the principle of deterrence, Israel would not allow a scenario where another regional state achieves nuclear capability, which would prolong Israel's ingrained sense of vulnerability (Heller, 2000:15).

It is clear that what is perceived as a hostile and occasionally unpredictable environment that is still weighing on the Israeli mind and reinforcing the feeling of weakness is the primary motivation for policy formulations regarding threats. Now that one of the more bellicose antagonists to Israel, Saddam Hussein, has been removed from power, the threat from Iraq has been considerably reduced, at least while U.S. forces maintain a significant presence there. The prospect of establishing a regional security regime in the Middle East, therefore, might be more realistic, and the pervading sense of vulnerability felt by the Israelis and which has been embedded in their self-identity appears to have been mitigated.

Israel has tried to overcome, in addition to the historical feeling of fragility, another dominant determinant in Israeli identity: its perceived sense of isolation, which has at times bordered on paranoia. A famous 1992 speech from former Prime Minister Rabin marked this mental and ideological rupture in cultural perceptions of political reality surrounding the state: ‘We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in thrall for almost half a century. We have to stop thinking that the whole world is against us (Barari, 2004:96). This marked a move towards peace, and a departure from the traditional, Zionist (and Likud) position that Israel, alone among many, should rely solely upon itself. This new posture embraced a new outlook and attempted to readjust Israeli identity to reflect that the divergent trend in Israeli security policy was, for the time being, in the ascendance.

In spite of these encouraging words, brief skirmishes in Arab territories, further acquisition of arms in order to maintain and increase the strategic advantage over its neighbors, continued promise of retaliation above and
beyond equivalent levels, and a perceptible increase in self-reliance in terms of personnel and arms all have marked Israeli regional security policy. Adding strength to Israel’s position, the only evidence that Israel has begun to mitigate its position on total self-reliance is the increasing support sought and granted from the United States. The Israeli government has historically relied excessively upon the military at the exclusion of other options. The relative success enjoyed by the Israeli military combined with the reality of no extant political option upon which security policy can be based has rendered the military indispensable, and the use of force the only viable option to ensure the survival of the state. This self-reinforcing process is now part of Israeli identity and is not easily broken, leaving no means for conflict resolution with its Arab neighbors other than the overwhelming use of force, which is unfortunately a guarantee that violence directed at Israel will continue.

Furthermore, because Israeli identity is so tied up with security, criticism regarding the security policy or military procedure in the name of defense is seen as having the potential to weaken the military, and by extension the state; such criticism is therefore discouraged. As a result of the lack of open debate regarding the conduct of the military and security policy within Israeli society, the population has resigned itself to an existence based, by and large, on the use of power, at the same time blinding it to both external and internal changes (Barari, 2004). Gradually, however, many Israelis have started to reject the overly-simplistic ‘black-and-white’, ‘good-and-bad,’ and ‘with us or against us’ portrayal of Arabs that has been consistently repeated, mantra-like, by the Israeli government.

The second threat perceived by Israel is the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. As Israel sees it, Palestinian resistance threatens the security of civilian and military individuals and not the survival of the state proper. But opinion on this varies: the political effects of this conflict are visible enough that some politicians and analysts have redefined it as a strategic threat (Heller, 2000:26). Regardless of how it is labeled, it has become evident to many within Israel that the continued use of what Israelis call terrorism (and Palestinians call resistance) and the growing threat to domestic Israeli security calls for new solutions. With growing sensitivity to the reality that many Palestinians will never completely accept the existence of a Jewish state on what was, as recently as sixty years ago, Palestine, and the increasing awareness of the futility of continuing the escalation of violence, Israel has begun erecting a wall around the West Bank, thus, creating a semi-permanent barrier between Israel and its neighbors. Rather than working towards a solution, military or otherwise, Israel has opted to return to the feeling of isolation so deeply ingrained in Israeli identity.

This sensitive issue can be understood through a combination of two variables, which constitute the most important factors determining the ideological polarization in Israel: a cultural/ideological prism and temporal perceptions. This demonstrates that threat perception can and is interpreted differently depending on perspective: where you stand (ideologically) determines where you stand (on an issue). Filtered through an agent’s respective lens, and viewed from the perspective of ego and not other, degrees of subjectivity inhibit one from understanding another’s position. Whereas some Israelis were determined to press on with the fight, the Rabin-led Labor party came to different conclusions regarding the status of the conflict: believing that a historical opportunity to make peace had arrived, the then-ruling party adopted the universalistic-humanist strand of Zionism and began negotiating for peace with the Palestinians. Through his and other Israeli leaders’ subjective understanding of the situation, and with vocal support of a large population of Israelis anxious to experience peace, Israel entered the Oslo peace negotiations.

The Oslo negotiations would not probably have taken place if Labor party leaders had not identified a fundamental change in Palestinian aims regarding Israel. (*) The softening of the process of stereotyping and mutual demonization, as well as the Israeli perception of progressive shifts in PLO policy, resulted in a greater flexibility and willingness to take risks (Aronoff and Aronoff, 1996:88). Breaking with the tradition of reliance on military strength to resolve conflicts which was made possible by a rare Leftist coalition stewarding Israel, the Labor party attempted to redefine Israeli self-identity by embracing a cooperative stance with its Arab neighbors. (**)

Rabin and Labor leaders, through the centralization of

(*) Former Israeli Prime Minster Yitzhak Shamir was on record as saying that had he not been elected in 1992, the Oslo process would never have started.

(**) The Labour-led government in 1992 is certainly the most dovish government ever formed in Israel.
power in the hands of dovish, rather than hawkish, individuals, attempted to stimulate a change in both internal and external perceptions of the situation. However, for a successful implementation of the policies inside broader fractions of the society to take hold, a significant portion of the public must also modify its cultural perceptions. The peace process became most vulnerable when political leaders on both sides failed to communicate with their respective constituencies; the intent of the process and the stipulations required to solidify peace. In addition, of vital importance in terms of gaining Israeli support for peace was the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to prevent violence; the link between Israeli security and support for the peace process is well documented.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that in spite of the importance of realism as an analytical tool to understand Israel's behavior in the security field, one needs to go beyond to reveal the fundamental reasons why Israel behaves the way it does. Therefore, the weight of the social dimension of the Israeli construction of menace has been underscored. While this paper does not take issue with the importance of realism, it makes the case that constructivism should be used as a complementary approach to understand Israeli security policies. Indeed, the Israeli mindset is more conditioned by their perception of history rather than objective reality.

However, one needs to look at the present and predict the future contours of Israeli thinking on security. As it is now evident, the nature of Israeli society determines its identity, which in turn constitutes, and is constituted by, its approach to national security. The progressive strengthening of sub-national identity has undermined social and political consensus and brought scholars to the conclusion that Israel, like many other contemporary societies, is in the throes of cultural conflict. In fact, Israel still struggles between its self-perception as 'a nation that dwells alone' and the natural attraction of normality (Dowty, 2003).

At the risk of oversimplification, one can discern two dominant groups confronting each other and creating the main political division in Israel. The first, the ‘internationalist coalition,’ is interested in complying with global trends and universal values, while the second, the ‘backlash coalition,’ is mainly concerned with the preservation and assertion of uniquely Jewish traditions (Heller, 2000:59). The internationalist coalition or the ‘secular-modernists’ frame issues with an eye to increasing Israel's standing in the world as well as the region. Alternatively, the ‘backlash coalition’, or the ‘religio-traditionalists’ have interpreted events and devised responses exclusively through the ideological Zionism-millenarian lens. As such, there is an increasingly divergent set of opinions about the future and what Israel's identity will be. Traditional Israel conceives the collective identity in terms of ethnicity ('Jewishness'); civic Israel tends to define identity in terms of territoriality ('Israeliic’) (Dowty, 2003). The winner of this internal conflict over ownership of identity, and perhaps even the conflict itself, will shape Israeli policy and foreign relations, which will in turn reshape Israeli identity. Thus, the victorious coalition would prevail in the society over the other and will completely determine how Israel defines or redefines itself (Heller, 2000:61). Since the creation of the state of Israel, it has been predominantly known as ‘the Jewish state’. This was reinforced in society by the frequent confusion of Israeli culture and religion, and further by the use of Zionist and Jewish symbols that is ripe with historical meaning for Jews but utterly incomprehensible to non-Jews.

With the increasing secularization of Israel, the distinction between national culture and the Jewish religion has grown, and the adherence and reliance upon Zionist mythology and symbols has decreased. The struggle for control of the direction of Israel between the secularists and the traditionalists is being waged in multiple spheres, and the two coalitions find themselves in competition over legal and constitutional issues, in education policy, and over public morality (Heller, 2000:63-64). A political victory for the ‘backlash’ group would reinforce the status quo: a security-dominated foreign policy with focus on deterrence, isolation, and self-reliance and with little chance of negotiated peace with its neighbors. In this Israel, individual rights and freedoms would be sublimated in favor of the greater good: the survival of the state of Israel. If the ‘internationalists’ prevail, a more dovish-rationalist approach from Israel is likely to be seen, with territorial issues solved with more focus from an instrumentalist approach. Ideally, rather than a battle for the right to define Israel's identity waged between the Right and the Left, ideological differences will be overcome, allowing for an organic redefinition of identity that doesn't exclude...
one side or the other. Israel can neither rely exclusively upon, nor be cut off entirely from its Jewish roots and so compromise will occur in the long run. The short term identity will be determined by the capacity of Israelis to tolerate violence acted on their behalf and against them. In the long term, only time will tell how events mold the Israeli psyche, determine their interests, and reshape their security outlook.

REFERENCES


