

Israel's "big fears-big stick" syndrome

By Tamar Hermann

■ Executive summary

The July-August 2014 Gaza operation brought in its wake an unprecedented wave of external criticism of Israel's overuse of its military's firepower. In light of the objective gap in the two sides' size and capabilities, external observers found it difficult to understand the Israeli strategy of striking heavily populated civilian areas, the death toll of which was around 2,000 Gazans dead and 10,000 wounded, many of them "uninvolved citizens", including children. The overwhelming Israeli public support for the operation and the weakness of domestic opposition was even more perplexing – even revolting – to non-Israelis. This expert analysis points to three factors that account for Israel's seemingly disproportionate reaction to Hamas's firing of rockets and missiles into its territory in July 2014. These are Israelis' permanent sense that they live in a bad neighbourhood in which their safety is never guaranteed; the frustration of the repeated failures of the peace talks, which are attributed by the Israelis to the immanent zero-sum nature of the conflict with the Palestinians; and the rising power of the national religious camp in Israel, which brings to the fore an ethno-national political ethos.

On September 10th 2012, in a speech delivered at a Jewish New Year's Eve reception at one of the largest Israeli air force bases, Ehud Barak, then Israel's defence minister, described Israel's regional strategic situation as "A villa in the jungle".¹ His words resonated well with the Israeli Jewish ear. The metaphor combined the two main features of the country's national self-image: much pride in the state's achievements in terms of its relative affluence,² modernity, and democratic political order, on the one hand, and the immanent threat from the chaotic and hostile external environment, on the other. The metaphor went hand in hand with Israeli Jews' deeply ingrained self-perception of Israel as a small and isolated island in the midst of a stormy, hostile Arab Islamic sea.

This mental picture of Israel's geopolitical and geostrategic location, which over the years has undeniably been sustained by various aggressive statements and armed attacks by its Arab neighbouring states and non-state actors, appears to hold water even today when from the military point of view Israel is undoubtedly a regional (even nuclear) superpower; from the economic point of view a far more

successful and modernised system than all its neighbouring countries; and politically, although far from being perfect, more stable and democratic in comparison to all other Middle Eastern countries.

Assuming that the Israeli Jewish public and its leaders are not oblivious to these realities, external observers may often wonder about the present sources and consequences of this arguably self-defeating blend of deep insecurity and self-admiration, which is accompanied by Israel's huge, ongoing investment in the improvement of its military capabilities and the suspicion of the outside world.

Because of the scope of this expert analysis only three out of numerous factors will be pointed to here to explain what I term Israel's "big fears-big stick" syndrome.

A bad neighbourhood

Rightly or wrongly, Israel has always seen itself as being located in a very bad neighbourhood. The Promised Land is perceived to be very poorly located. Even before the eruption of the Arab Spring, which is now often labelled by

¹ A year previously, in summer 2011, Israel experienced an unprecedented wave of socioeconomic protests that focused on the housing crisis – a reality that made the villa metaphor highly ironic and was another indication of the minister's detachment from the daily problems of the average Israeli citizen.

² Israel's macroeconomic indicators have been very positive for years and its economy was hardly affected by the 2008 global economic crisis. For an updated summary of national economic indicators, see Israel Bank (2014).

many experts as the Arab Winter – or in a less judgmental fashion as the Arab Awakening – most Israelis were reluctant to become politically, economically and culturally integrated into the Middle East. As has been empirically proved, even Israeli Jews of Middle Eastern descent are looking westward, not to the region (Hermann & Yaar-Yuchtman, 2013). The Middle East and its people are considered inherently underdeveloped and antagonistic towards the very idea of Jewish national self-determination and its prime manifestation – Israel as a Jewish state.

But the neighbourhood has recently deteriorated even more: in the past, Arab regimes were considered to be hostile to Israel, but at the same time they were also considered stable enough to take responsibility and observe short-, medium- and long-term commitments and agreements. For example, Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, although one of Israel's most bitter rivals, was widely seen as and proved himself for many years to be a reliable Israeli partner. With no peace agreement in place, under his presidency Israel's north-east border was almost totally peaceful from 1974 onward. His son Bashar, who succeeded him in 2000, is no longer in a similar position of command: he is too busy fighting for the survival of his regime and is clearly incapable of securing his country's border with Israel, which is a real issue in light of the recent victories of the Islamic State and other fundamentalist non-state actors in his territory.

The same goes for the rather shaky regime of King Abdullah of Jordan. Although at the time of writing the Egyptian regime headed by President al-Sisi and supported by the military seems fairly stable and cooperative,³ the frequent changes that have occurred in Egypt since 2011 and the mounting power of the Muslim Brotherhood and other, even more radical Islamic political actors who are openly anti-Israel nourish Israel's sense that it cannot take any risks on its southern border, where Gaza is located.

Against this background, Israeli Jews and their leaders see themselves not only as a threatened enclave, but also as a regional *sui generis* in terms of maintaining a democratic political system, which despite its shortcomings is still considered as part of the extended democratic family even by external experts (e.g. Freedom House, 2014; Merkel, 2011).

Failed talks with the Palestinians

Nothing succeeds like success, as the saying goes. At the same time nothing is more discouraging and frustrating than repeated failures. Following the collapse of the Oslo Process and the reoccurring dead ends in the subsequent rounds of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, both direct and indirect, including U.S. secretary of state John Kerry's recently failed initiative, for a few years now most Israeli Jews have been quite pessimistic about the prospects of ever reaching a peace agreement. From conflict resolution

the national discourse has turned in the best-case scenario to conflict management. Negotiations are generally welcomed (around two-thirds of Israeli Jews support dialogue), but hope of a peaceful resolution seems realistic to no more than 25% in most public opinion polls, and even by a lesser proportion in terms of elected leaders' statements in this regard.

In the early 1990s concrete problems seemed to be the obstacle to peace (borders, water, Jerusalem, the right of return, etc.). Over the years, however, two critical negative additions were made to this array of issues: firstly, after the death of Yasir Arafat no Palestinian leader seemed capable of bringing on board the entire Palestinian people, even if a peace agreement were to be reached at the elite level. This issue became particularly critical for the Israelis after the electoral victory of Hamas in 2006 and the creation of a second Palestinian entity in Gaza.

The second negative factor is the growing saliency of the religious aspect of the conflict on both sides, which makes it effectively a zero-sum game. From a political conflict, in recent years the Israeli-Palestinian stand-off has been turning slowly but surely into a holy war of the type that history tells us is dramatically less prone to be resolved by diplomatic means. This transformation puts Israel in direct conflict not only with the Palestinians or the Arab countries, but with the entire Muslim world. The recent news and images featuring the atrocities inflicted by the Islamic State and other fundamentalist Islamic actors on non-Muslims are naturally not very helpful in alleviating Israeli fears, pushing it into acquiring bigger and bigger sticks and taking no security risks, even if this does not serve its purpose and make it more secure in the longer run.

The rise of ethno-nationalism

From the regional and the bilateral, the discussion now moves to the internal level. Many experts have pointed out the rightward shift of the Israeli Jewish electorate. This is true, but it is not the entire truth, mainly because over the years, despite the electoral weakness of the Israeli political left, many of its original ideas have been absorbed by those who define themselves as of the right. The most important contribution of the left is the two-state solution, which is now favoured by about two-thirds of the Israeli Jewish public. It is argued here that the electoral shift to the right is less significant than another phenomenon – the rising power of the national-religious camp, which is indeed located on the right, but represents the more radical, belligerent and less democratic part of it. This development, which brings with it a move from the political periphery to the centre of an ethno-national political ethos, was manifested by the dramatic increase in the number of parliamentary seats (12 out of 120) won by the national-religious Jewish Home party (formerly the National Religious Party – Mafdal) in the 2013 elections.⁴ Currently

3 In a recent Peace Index public opinion poll almost two-thirds of Israeli Jewish interviewees defined Egypt as a fair broker between Israel and Hamas. A majority (55%) of Israeli Arab interviewees maintained the opposite – that al-Sisi's Egypt is not a fair broker. See Peace Index (2014).

4 According to current surveys, the expected number of seats that this party will win in the next elections is 19.

the leaders of this party are challenging Prime Minister Netanyahu's alleged "softness" vis-à-vis the Palestinians from within his coalition government.

A recent empirical study (Hermann et al., 2014) found that the size of this sociopolitical camp is almost double what it is usually presumed to be (21% of the Jewish population instead of 10%). Furthermore, it includes not only national-orthodox individuals, as was formerly assumed, but also many Israeli Jews who are traditionalists and even secular. The non-orthodox members of this camp identify with it exactly because of the hawkish religious-nationalistic blend it stands for. This study also revealed that the supporters of this camp tend to frame the conflict with the Palestinians in ethno-national and ethno-religious terms, have fairly low trust in the state's democratic institutions, and are less prone to accept political compromises in order to obtain a peaceful solution to the conflict. The epistemological authority of this group's religious leaders is more respected among its members than by any other political grouping in Israel and is also seen by a significant number of this group as being greater than that of the country's elected office bearers. The sensitivity of the members of this group to humanitarian concepts such as "uninvolved citizens" (in a conflict environment) was found to be significantly less than that of the Israeli public at large.

To summarise, together with other factors that were not discussed here (for example, the clear increase in anti-Semitic rhetoric and activities in Europe and other parts of the world, which obviously contributes to the deepening of Israeli fears), the combination of ongoing regional instability, the repeated failure of the peace talks and the domestic

sociopolitical transformation entailed in the growing weight of the national-religious camp all nourish the already complicated cognitive combination of a permanent, hegemonic sense of external threat and Jewish Israelis' deeply ingrained alienation from their geographical, religious and cultural location. All these account for what may seem from the outside as Israel's current resistance to peace and over-reliance on military force. However, any therapist will confirm that the greater the fear, frustration and belief in divine guidance, the bigger the stick carried.

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