

# COMMENTARY

No. 80

Friday, 19 October 2012

## **Israel's National Security: Myths And Reality**

**ALON BEN MEIR**

**NEW YORK UNIVERSITY**

Israel's national security has, and for good reason, continues to be of prime concerns not only to its citizens but to world Jewry and many of its friends and allies around the globe. Israel has every reason to be weary of its enemies, who have time and again demonstrated that they are not worthy of trust and remain committed to Israel's destruction both in word and deeds. For this reason, many Israelis have become increasingly more pessimistic and sceptical about the prospect of peace and for that matter, its durability even when achieved. This argument, however cogent it may be, has lost much of its significance as time and circumstances have changed. To be sure, although Israel's military power remains central to its national security; no territorial depth or continued military build-up provides Israel the ultimate security it needs. In the final analysis, Israel's security rests on peace with the Arab states, and its formidable military prowess must now be used to secure that peace, however elusive it may seem.

There are those who suggest that Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank will make Israel vulnerable to rocket attacks from the mountains overlooking Israel's population and industrial centres in the coastal strip below, rendering the country indefensible. As one critic wrote citing an American military expert, "modern weapon systems, most of them with components which require line-of-sight emplacement, if deployed in the [Judean and Samarian] mountains... [Israel's] present width in the central sector of the country would be reduced from 40-55 miles to 9-16 miles... [which] would render the country indefensible." To support this argument there are those who simply take at face value the statements made by right-wing Israeli officials who link territorial depth to national security without examining the real relevance between the two, especially in the context of the West Bank and the territorial depth involved.

Against the one "American military expert" there are hundreds of Israeli military experts who disagree with this argument. No one is suggesting that a peace agreement, in and of itself, provides Israel instant security. Indeed, any peace accord will have to be implemented in stages that would entail quid-pro-quo requiring both sides to fully adhere to all provisions of the

**Middle East Institute @ New Delhi, [www.mei.org.in](http://www.mei.org.in)**

agreement, especially on the matter of national security concerns to Israel. Thus, security measures will have to be in place including, for example, the stationing of an international peace force, led by the United States, stationed along the borders with Jordan replete with enforcement capabilities. More important, however, is Israel's deterrence and its own military that has and can prevent any violation of an agreement with the Palestinians.

With today's military technology and the proliferation of short and medium range rockets (ranging from three miles to three hundred) in the hands of Hamas and Hezbollah, "modern weapon systems," regardless of where they are placed, can hit every population centre in Israel. Therefore, whether the distance from the mountains of the West Bank is '40 to 55 miles or reduced to 9 to 16 miles' will hardly make any difference. What will make, in the final analysis, a real difference are Israel's retaliatory capabilities and the potential unacceptable damage that Israel can inflict that would persuade the enemy from provoking Israel.

Ask yourself, why have the Palestinians in the West Bank, Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon have refrained from provoking Israel in any serious manner since the Palestinians in the West Bank suffered from the Israeli onslaught in the wake of the Second Intifada in 2000, Hezbollah in 2006 and Hamas in 2009? Hamas and Hezbollah in particular have not as yet recovered from the destruction they sustained, and for them to re-engage Israel militarily would be nothing short of suicide. This is the reason why the Palestinian Authority opted to forsake violence to achieve its political objectives by peaceful means and the reason behind the relative calm that has prevailed. If one adds to that the element of the peace agreement, the likelihood of a new conflagration will become increasingly less desirable.

The issue is not where the border is finally drawn. Successive Israeli governments have sold the myth to the Israeli public linking the borders to national security, when in fact building settlements, such as Ariel, deep into the West Bank is ideologically motivated and has little if anything to do with national security. Indeed, what makes the border between Israel and a future Palestinian state defensible is not as much where the final border is finally established, but continued Israeli deterrence and, in particular, on the establishment of a comprehensive peace and normal relations in which both sides develop, over time, a vested interest. Any claim to the contrary is baseless regardless of what the ultimate intentions of the Palestinians are, as many Israelis contend.

It is a common belief in Israel that the Arabs, especially the Palestinians, cannot be trusted. They further argue that even if an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is achieved today the Palestinians will annul it as soon as they feel that its dissolution will work to their advantage. Many Israelis insist that the Palestinians are inherently committed to Israel's destruction and that for the Palestinians, forging a peace agreement will amount to nothing more than a tactical move while waiting for a better day to realize their ultimate goal to bring about the destruction of Israel. The question is, however, who would make peace on the basis of trust alone? Trust can be cultivated only through a constructive and ongoing relationship that only peace can foster.

Let us assume for a moment that the lack of trust is the main obstacle to making peace. The question is, when will the day come when both sides begin to trust each other? Will it come after

developing trade, commercial, cultural, scientific and diplomatic ties, or will it come when the occupation continues, the settlements expand, multiple checkpoints remain in place and thousands of Palestinian prisoners languish in Israeli jails ? Defying Israel today does not come from religious beliefs, albeit Hamas and others find it convenient to create such a link to convey their convictions. Indeed, notwithstanding the religious component of the conflict, the people, including the Palestinians want to live. They know that there is no virtue in dying in vain, especially when the prospect of destroying Israel is virtually non-existent, and more than anything else, when they have something to hold onto, like an independent state of their own.

Israel is and remains, for as far as the eye can see, a military power that no individual Arab state or combination of states can overwhelm militarily, and if they try they will do so at their peril. At no time in its history has Israel been stronger militarily. This mighty military prowess can and will be used to deter, defend or go on the offensive should Israel's security be threatened. For this reason Israel cannot mortgage its security to a third party, it must remain vigilant, powerful and ready at all times to take any legitimate military action deemed necessary to ensure its survival.

Such a military power however can and indeed must also be used to reach out to the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab states from a position of strength. Otherwise, what is the point of such a military prowess if it does not advance peace? Israel will become increasingly more isolated, gradually evolving into a garrison state with ever diminishing friends and allies. As it is, there is not a single country in the whole world, including the US, that supports the occupation and calls on Israel to end it for its own sake.

Meanwhile Israel is gradually losing its soul and its resonance as it was envisioned by its founders. It is time for the Netanyahu government to be honest with the public and stop covering for the expansion and the building of new settlements in the name of national security.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/israels-national-security-myths-and-reality/>

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in U.S. and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy****