Israeli War Perception from the Six Days War to the Operation Cast Lead: An Analysis of the Israeli Siege-Mentality

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THE FOLLOWING STUDY ADDRESSES from an historical perspective the changes that have occurred in the Israeli perception of war in the last 40 years and the transformation of the conflict itself from an inter-state to a two-people war, in which the two parties are reciprocally hostile but so interdependent that the conflict is about to take on the features of a civil war. The *siege-mentality* perspective, launched by the pioneer studies combining politics and psychology carried out by Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992), reveals itself to be a useful and overarching hermeneutical category able to order and explain the multifold aspects related to war and peace perception in Israel. A premise to this work is the belief that the *siege-mentality* is not only a successful academic tool to penetrate the content and summarize some trends of the Israeli internal debate, but also to explain the major shifts in Israeli politics and to reveal the powerful forces active in society's awareness and government decision-making about war-motivation.

Israel is generally self-defining itself as a 'people dwelling alone' (Arian 1989, 603), which stands for the *credo* of a society strongly believing in itself but not feeling comfortable in eased relations with the outside world. Notwithstanding the long-standing duration of this belief, the feeling of loneliness of Israel among the countries has changed according to the political pressures the Western and Arab world were exerting on it on different occasions, especially in time of conflict or strain.

The year 1967 represents a watershed in Israeli history, as it is marking the transition between two well pin-pointed periods: on one hand, the time of a country founded on international, legitimate borders

sanctioned by the U N, and on the other hand, a new epoch where Israeli boundaries are neither marked out, nor internationally agreed upon, nor even officially settled. What is changing dramatically is the relationship with the territory, with what is domestically defined as

Eretz Israel, a concept very hard to translate in any Western language due to its plentiful meanings and resonances, too often trivialized in 'country,' which alludes only to its territorial dimension. However, for the Israelis, for the role Zionism has played in the return of the Jews to their mythical-historical motherland and for all the cultural, religious and messianic meanings related to it, the translation with 'country' is just not accurate enough and does not allow one to infer the role this specific notion of the land has played in setting the non-solving character of the Arab–Israeli conflict (Kimmerling 1983).

It is important to underline that only from 1967 on , do there appear movements matching messianic aspirations and political ambitions as *Gush Emounim,* which convey a militant nationalist message and show an outspoken determination to annex all that is left of the Palestinian territories in order to re-establish the ancient Jewish kingdom of Salomon's time according to the dimensions cited in the Bible. From a cultural and political perspective, a radical change has taken place: what up to that moment had been rejected by classical Zionism as a secular movement and had led to the relative marginalization of religious groups inside the country and the establishment, is turned into an acceptable stance which competes on an equal footing with other political trends. Later, the same message will be conveyed by the National Religious Party, originally founded with totally opposite intents (Ben-Porat et al. 2008).

Initially, the attitude of the *Mifleget Havodá* (the Labour Party) is negotiating the return of the occupied Palestinian territories in exchange for peace agreements and security guarantees on boundaries. However, negotiations do not come up with any concrete agreement, whereas the advantages of the Palestinian territories' acquisition are immediately visible to both the military and the government. In terms of strategic depth and removal of close military threats from urban centers, the possession of Palestinian territories proves itself to be a real improvement in global security conditions (Bar-Tal, Jacobson, and Klieman

1998). This will change Israeli internal perception of both the majority of public opinion and the establishment towards the West Bank and Gaza, and will lead soon to a patent will not to give them up as long as stable and comprehensive peace agreements are not reached with the neighbouring countries. The above-mentioned requirement – still not met by 2009 – has been put forward since 1967 as the main reason for justifing the occupation, always perceived as transitory and therefore never made official. In 1967 there then arose the 'Occupied Territories' question:' by then, nobody was going to predict how long it would have lasted and whether it would have marked a second *Nakba* or just a temporary back fall.

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What is relevant for the purpose of this study, is that Israeli mentality in changing according to the new, improved security conditions. For the first time in its short history, Israel holds safe borders and therefore is no longer at the mercy of the events and of the annihilation will of the neighbouring Arab countries. Besides, having re-conquered the Old City, it renews the mythical link between Judaism and the city, and has turned it into its new capital. In the aftermath of 1967, Israel is inebriated and enjoying for the first time regional power: not only has it defeated again all the Arab states allied against it, but has done away with the constant fear of obliteration (Mroz 1980). The army and the country relax, and this attitude will be accounted as the main reason of the temporary defeat for TSAHAL in 1973.

At the same time, also world perceptions on Israel are modifing themselves: from a little country surrounded by hostile enemies on all sides, Israel's perception turns into a middle regional power, able to change the *status quo* according to its national interests and without any preliminary authorization from the Superpowers. The Cold War is still stretching out and polarizing any regional conflict. Some officers of the IDF, interviewed in the 70s, declared that at that time Israel was mostly frightened by an eventual Soviet intervention and considered all Arab states as Soviet proxies (Mroz 1980, 119). Therefore, Israel never really abbandoned its *siege mentality,* which was dating back to the difficult conditions of the former Yishuv, and this time more because of the international community than for actual security reasons. Since 1967, indeed, the international community and the Western

countries are no longer universally backing Israel as their regional ally and have started claiming the return of the Palestinian territories to Jordan under the aegis of U N Resolution n. 242. Besides, Israel has taught another scary lesson to the same international community: that [238] the outbreak of a war started out of strict defensive reasons – such as a real annihilation threat – could be easily turned into a successful story able to achieve results much superior to any early expectations (Levy 1997).

The Yom Kippur War partially dismantled this image. Only 6 years later, Israel found itself again coping with a new 'annihilation' threat. The theory of territorial guarantees has proved not able to meet the country's security needs, and, despite the small war achievements, Egypt and Syria have been able to restore the respective reputation of their countries. Israel also had reconfirmed its military might, but stepping out of the conflict with a security perception deeply jeopardized. Israel proved not to be able to emancipate itself from a constant alert condition. Nevertheless, the Yom Kippur War stays in the national memory as the last totally defensive war, responding to the very objectives for which T S A H A L had been established and meeting the consensus and support of the whole population, with the single exception of the ultraorthodox streams not loyal to the State.

WHAT STANDS FOR 'SECURITY CONCERNS' IN ISRAEL

It is now fundamental to better define the 'security' concept, as it comprises a multifold condition and aspects related to the military dimension but not exclusively to that. Bar-Tal defined it as a 'mixed perception' (Bar-Tal 1991), which includes past experiences, such as the peculiar history of a people, the interpretation and the collective memory related to them, the actual level of confidence and self-confidence, the intensity of external dangers, the index of internal cohesion, current political and economical stability, demographical features, education attitudes and so on. If it is true that all these elements contribute to the overall security perception of every single State, it is however possible to single out some specific characteristics in the Israeli case. Bar-Tal et al. (1988) claimed, upon commenting on data related to a survey

on history teaching and education in Israeli schools both from the first and the secondary cycle, that official teaching material should acquaint students with a highly-ideological recollection of persecutions suffered by the Jews in any epoch and latitude. The Jews are presented as a universal target of violence and discrimination everywhere in the Diaspora they were a minority confronting an hostile majority, thus inferring that Zionism was the only way-out to bring the Jews after 2000 years to regain sovereignty on their land and put an end to their historical suffering (Bar-Tal 2000).

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This explains the great relevance attached to the 'Jewish' character of the State, which is regarded by the great majority of Israelis as an unconditional requirement, notwithstanding the ethnical and anti-democratic content it encompasses. The demand to represent a majority in their own State is linked to the power to establish institutions and to pass laws in line with the Jewish tradition and social organization, thus claiming that official and public recognition of their collective rights and freedoms which had been historically denied to them under both Christian- and Muslim-majority States. But the 'Jewish' definition does not only include positive and empowering meanings, as it keeps unchanged from the tradition the antinomy between Jew and non-Jew, between *Yehudim* and *Goyim* (Ben Dor 1988), deeply affecting the collective mentality of a country which has always regarded itself as a 'lonely dweller' (Arian 1989). This spreading perception, in constant rise from the 70s, according to domestic surveys, negatively affects the relationship between Israel and its Western allies, the E U and the U S, which are reckoned as 'friendly' only as long as they don't betray the slightest Israeli expectation. Moreover, it affects the domestic political debate, with continuous calls on national unity aimed at leveling down conflicting opinions on the definition of national interests, both on civil and military matters (Bar-Tal 1991). Thus it is no surprise that the surveys of the 70s reveal that the great majority of Israeli public opinion did not foresee any peace agreement with the Arab states in the short term (*New York Times* polls, 4 April 1979), a firm belief that would have been denied only few years later when Prime Minister Begin would has smoothly reached a compromise with its historical enemy, Egypt. The peace agreement with Egypt has proved

stable in the long run and assured Israel 30 years of peace (2009) on its southern border. In support of a more pragmatic and less ideological attitude towards peace and war issues, a new political movement was born in those years: *Shalom Akshav* (Peace Now). It had strongly backed the peace negotiations with Egypt and was declaring as the main aim of its political activity the striving for secure and legitimate borders for all the countries involved in the Arab–Israeli conflict.

THE FIRST LEBANON WAR (1982) AS A TEST-CASE OF A MORE AGGRESSIVE MINDSET

The first peace agreement with an Arab State would not have had those revolutionary consequences that might have been initially expected. The conflict in Lebanon, following it only by 3 years, revealed a substantial change in Israel's conflict-management attitude. The country proved highly vulnerable to border violations by Palestinian 'guerrilla' groups and liable to react more actively and impulsively than before. If in 1973 Israel had reacted to a effective land invasion by the Syrian and Egyptian armies, anyhow not aimed at Israel's annihilation, in 1982 the spark which started the war was a single episode of terrorism carried out at the expense of Israel in far-away Great Britain: the killing of Ambassador Shlomo Argov by the Abu Nidal group, related to the PLO. In practice, this episode would constitute the pretext to cease Palestinian guerrillas' incursion over Israeli borders, and, moreover, to uproot the Palestinian PLO's leadership and supporters *tout court* from Lebanon.

The Israeli establishment came up with the persuasion that the opportunities of war should no longer be awaited passively as unforeseeable events, but considered according to the positive gains and changes they could bring about. Some elements eased the adoption of the new war doctrine: the rise to power of a true nationalist party (the Likud), the safety margin already achieved by the country and military might balance increasingly more favorably to the IDF, as testified by the IAF's bombing Iraqi nuclear plants in 1981. This positive trend led Israel leadership to think that the country had already achieved the means and the strategic superiority needed in order to change the *status quo* and redefine the regional balance according to its security needs. The

overall international context, with the election of Reagan as US President, could have contributed to the IDF adoption of a more aggressive strategy, but this choice was essentially rooted in domestic politics trends. The UN defamation internal campaigns and labeling the PLO merely as a terrorist organization without any legitimacy whatsoever, were already signs of the leadership's intention to promote a change and embed it into the public opinion. The then PLO represented a political rather than a military menace, but the IDF deemed better to cope with it in military terms, as they were regarded as more effective to achieve results in the short term and more easy to deploy.

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IDF budget and training methods changed according to the new strategic policy and the new military needs, as the IDF, even before the outbreak of the First Intifada, had to confront new situations, such as its military capillary deployment in the West Bank and Gaza, in stable contact with the civilian population. If the occupation of the Palestinian territories and their military administration had already changed the function and aims of the IDF from its original strictly defensive motivation, the Lebanon War and some episodes of exceptional violence such as the massacre in Sabra and Chatila, deeply upset Israel's public opinion. The great majority of Israelis basically divided themselves along two lines: on the one hand, the line of those who viewed the support to whatsoever national strategic and security interests a as loyalty test to the State ad Zionism (Ben-Porat et al. 2008); on the other hand, the line of those who still believe in objective criteria to judge upon the necessity and the suitability of a war, whether started by Israel or suffered by it.

The Sabra and Chatila massare, and the revealed connivance of the Israeli army, led to the call of a wide demonstration which took place in Tel Aviv which gathered 400,000 Israelis voicing their contempt for the government. Demonstrations were never really rooted and resorted to as a means of protest in Israel, therefore the event stood out in the national context. However, the inquiry commission did not point to any personal responsibility.

The internal fracture between 'hawks and doves,' already started in 1967, outlined itself more deeply. It is important to say that the most significant change emerged in the civil society and not from an input

by the political leadership (Wistrich and Ohana 1995). The differences between these two 'areas' or 'halves' of the country were to turn even more visible in the 1990s and during the Oslo peace agreement years, only to fade away and totally cease to exist after the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000.

The Lebanon War proved to be more aggressive and less grounded than any other previous conflict, but Bar-Tal (2007) points out that the public opinion's general attitude and perception of the IDF did not change due to it: TSAHAL was still ranking as a superior and ethic-inspired army. In all the previous conflict, the IDF had run major risks and registered many losses, moreover it was the 'people's army,' in which every single citizen of the State had served, therefore it could not lose its long-standing reputation over a single mistake. Its guiding principles were good and they were going to stay.

THE FIRST INTIFADA REVEALS THE ISRAELI
PROJECT ON THE 'OCCUPIED TERRITORIES'

In 1987, the great majority of Israelis were totally shocked by the outbreak of the First Intifada. For over 20 years, Israel had not dared to define the juridical status of the Palestinian territories subjected first to a military and later to a civilian administration. Some public statements in this sense released by the US administration, the UN and the European States on the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, never materialized in concrete proposals or in political pressure towards Israel. In fact, for 20 years (1967–1987) almost 6,000,000 people were left in a political *vacuum* and in the powerlessness of defining themselves politically. Still 20 years further on (2009), this situation of collective oblivion looks more like responding to a strategic vision of the Israeli military establishment than being a simple product of accident.

There is no intention to claim that there had ever been a detailed plan of ethnical cleansing (Pappé 2006) or population transfer, as some academics and some sectors of the European Left would allude to, but rather that some long-term vision and approaches had shaped the decisions of the Israeli leadership regarding the Territories. They could be summarized as follows: the Palestinian Territories shall never become a

State in full, that is with all the relevant external trade and communication powers and border control tasks; the Palestinian Territories shall not share a sovereign border with any Arab State and shall never again constitute a military threat to Israel. In order to achieve these overarching goals, three elements were needed: refrain from drawing too much international attention to the fate of the Palestinian Territories; refrain from proclaiming officially their juridical status; ensure slow but steady expansion of Jewish settlement areas in militarily strategic points of the West Bank and Gaza.

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   In this context, the First Intifada was perceived as a sudden blow to a well-defined plan and as a break in the daily routine management of the Territories, which was able to mark a point. The first shortcoming was that it revealed itself as a phenomenon apt to draw international attention, making the headlines of newspapers and broadcasting news for more than 4 years (1987–1991); the second was that it showed to the world the extension of Jewish settlements already achieved; the third, that it did not consist of a P L O initiative, that might have always been disregarded or defamed by the Israeli authorities by recalling P L O's terrorist affiliation, but instead consisted of a popular, spontaneous upraising, very difficult to disdain by propaganda means. Thus, it is comprehensible that the First Intifada was able to raise concern and tension in the Israeli establishment, worried at the same time about the increase in violence and the international and domestic public opinions reactions. While the First Intifada was raging, some sectors of Israeli society started considering the 1967 occupation as the turning point that had not only turned upside down the war perception in Israel, but that might be able slowly to turn the whole country into a new-style colonial power. Those Israelis who started fearing the most negative outcomes of occupation, launched a series of protests and campaigns advocating Israeli withdrawal, and would have been the main supporters of the late Oslo agreements. However, only the more educated and open sectors of society acknowledged the risk, with the great majority of the people lagging behind. The majority's attitude in Israel was to show criticism only in on a limited and event-based tendency, as if generally speaking the country, blocked in its siege-mentality, could not look at the choices ahead with the right level of

detachment that a mature democracy should always keep regarding all its deliberations, and particularly in those related to peace and war options.

THE 1990S AS A RELATIVE BREACH: THE OSLO AGREEMENTS FROM THE PROSPECTIVE OF ISRAEL'S SECURITY

Historians love to say that there are as many versions of facts as there are witnesses of them. Surely, the Oslo agreement history is a good example of a historical process which gave rise to many alternative and conflicting narratives. Summarizing, there is a Palestinian official and moderate version, which recalls the Olso agreements as a great opportunity for peace, later withdrawn by the Israelis, who had the feeling of having offered too much, and went back to their dealing-out positions. The second version, always belonging to the Palestinian side, is that of Hamas and other more extreme groups, which had rejected the Oslo agreement's principle since its early beginning, as spoiled in its outlay and unable to deliver those substantial changes Palestinians deserved.

On the Israeli side there also exist two competing versions. They will be analyzed as exemplified through the opinions of two academics, reflecting on them some years later, after their failure, and drawing two opposite conclusions from the same events. Bar-Tal and Vertzberger discussed about this in an article entitled 'Between Hope and Fear' (Bar-Tal and Vertzberger 1997)

Bar-Tal (Bar-Tal and Vertzberger 1997) expresses himself somehow in a nostalgic way, positive about the peace prospective that opened up in the early 1990s, and quoting a survey showing that 55% of the Israelis declared then their acceptance of the principle of the release of territories in exchange for peace. He recalls that there were some difficult points in the negotiations of no immediate agreement, but the ideological adhesion to the 'Great Israel' project had dropped dramatically among the majority of Israelis, who were on the contrary looking at the peace process as a painful but obligatory way to improve the overall security conditions. In this sense, Bar-Tal detected the major strategic mistake of the Labour Party in casting and channeling all public atten-

tion to the security gains the Oslo agreements would have delivered. In other words, the peace-process would not have been presented by the authorities other than as a way of stamping out the constant fear and anxiety of further daily Palestinian attacks, as in the old days of the First Intifada. The public consensus had ceased once the attacks would have started again.

Vertzberger (Bar-Tal and Vertzberger 1997) declares himself less optimistic, both about the premises and the consequences of the process. His main point is that public opinion in Israel was not ready to address such a radical change imposed from the top by a political establishment focused only on seizing the opportunity, without paying attention to raise enough support and consensus in the country. In other words, Vertzberger claims that a spread of support for the Oslo agreements in Israel had never been the case, instead there was a generic positive attitude towards the opening of negotiations with the Palestinians which did not envisage concrete proposals and dramatic choices. This would have been the reason explaining all the hatred towards Rabin, but also the fact that his killing did not move public opinion towards broader support for the peace agreements, but rather, to its opposite. An agreement with the PLO would have never been able to assure Israelis security and stability guarantees comparable to an inter-State agreement, therefore it would never have met the basic security needs of Israel. The 'intimacy' between Palestinians and Israelis would have also played a negative role: contrary to the assumption that two people closely acquainted with each other should develop some kind of understanding, the daily life violence and mutual incomprehension would have caused Palestinians and Israelis to drift apart.

Whatever version could be assessed as more credible, a right-wing government was elected right after Rabin's murder, an event that for the seriousness of the circumstances among which the killing was carried out, might have led the country to adapt totally opposite choices. To sum up the conclusions, the 'attitude towards conflict,' as analyzed by Bar-Tal in his latest works (Bar-Tal, Ravin, and Dgani-Hirsh 2009), did not recede but rater intensified after 1995 and it was further aggravated by Palestinian petty violence. Perhaps the territorial concessions advanced in Oslo had been really proved over-daring and the Israelis

were just outdistancing themselves from them, not without some sense of relief.

THE LAST DECADE: THE PREEMPTIVE WAR AS THE NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

The last decade of years, approximately included between 1996 and 2009, was marked by many major events – the negotiations started by the Israeli Prime Minister Barak, known as the 'Camp David Agreement,' the outbreak of the Second Intifada (Intifada Al-Aqsa), the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon (2000), the building of the Defense Wall (2002), the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (2005), the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War (2006), and finally the Gaza bombing in 2008, also known as 'Operation Cast Lead.' All these events occurred in a international context deeply changed by the emergence of a militant and over active US administration that considered the entire world as a stage for possible 'defensive' wars as defined by US national interests.

The example of preemptive war offered by the Bush administration to Israel is surely not a positive instance, but the Israeli political leadership had generally supported US initiatives only as long as long as they were meeting Israel's own national security interests (Shur and Nevo 2003). The political scene in Israel is today in ever-moving, with a constant inclination towards the electoral strengthening of right-wing parties since 1996: Barak has maybe been the last Labour politician in power (2000), but his hesitant and fickle attitude has made the country lose the last concrete opportunity for peace.

The Second Intifada was characterized by the highest level of violence ever encountered in the country and adopted the bewildering technique of suicide-attacks, which undermined the international support for the Palestinian cause, at the same time pushing Israelis further into a stronger disenchantment and mistrust. The target of suicide attacks being mostly civilians, it had increased the self-perception of Israelis as vulnerable at every moment, somehow in daily-life conditions bitter and more risky than those prevailing in war times.

Many sources and studies (INSS, Israel Democracy Institute, Konrad Adenauer Foundation) confirm that the Al-Aqsa Intifada had

opened up a new vicious circle in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict: first of all, it had contributed to delegitimizing again the A N P, denying the results achieved with Oslo and revealing, according to the Israelis, the 'true face' (Ross 2002) of Arafat: that of a man of dubious morality, able to back suicide attacks after having shaken hands with Rabin on the White House lawn; second point, it further weakend the Labour positions in the country, and all the Doves' campaigns reaching-out strength, accused of 'closing out' the country and its security.

Nowadays in Israel, the perception is widespread that only the right-wing parties may ever deliver peace and run negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab State without putting security and internal cohesion at stake (Osnos 2006). Besides, the right-wing had campaigned electorally as a more dynamic and pragmatic force: men like Ariel Sharon, founder of the new party *Kadima* (literally, 'Ahead'), have proposed a new conception of security based on Israeli unilateralism. This new approach is based on the conviction, from the Israeli side, totally backed by public opinion, that there is no real partner for peace on the other side but that a military redeployment is needed. In this sense, the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 over the establishment of a security belt patrolled by U N troops and the evacuation of settlers from Gaza in 2005, respond to the same unilateral logic.

It is interesting to point out the outstanding support towards unilateralism coming from different social classes and shuffling the previous political stances. The first consequence to be drawn from this data is that the suicide attacks and their strong support among Palestinians had led the Israelis to a total distrust not easily surmountable. This further led to many practical effects, such as the broad consensus over the building of the Defense Barrier all along the 1967 borders, completely sealing off the West Bank. There were also economical factors concurring to the same decision: part of the *liberal* and Labour sectors esteem that the State is spending far too much on the military and especially in the defense and guarding of remote settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, inhabited by few, scattered people, which do not bring any concrete benefits to the country and respond only to an ideological-religious attachment to the land. Besides, the mili-

tary itself is facing new challenges: the universal youth conscription is decreasing, and therefore also I D F military personnel. This is due to many different factors not likely to disappear in the next decades: religious people's exonerations, reservists' presence abroad, reservists

protesting against serving in the Territories, and so on. If the number of checkpoints spread all over the West Bank and around Gaza, and the forces assigned to the protection of small and big settlements all around the Territories, are taken into account, it stands out clearly why the I D F is facing its first serious personnel lack in the last 40 years. This condition of strain has led the military authority to resort to private security agencies for guarding at checkpoints, flying checkpoints and other similar functions, with all the related risks.

LAST REMARKS: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM ISRAEL?
The Gaza evacuation has reopened a cleavage, that was always lingering between the religious and the secular in the country: the great majority of Gaza settlers belonged to the religious stream or national-religious movements, whereas the Sharon government's attitude – and of all the Kadima leadership – was presenting itself as mostly secular and pragmatic, in opposition to the very same principles of the historical right (Jabotinsky, Herut, Likud) from which it stems. Olmert embraced the same strategy of unilateralism as the late Sharon and advocated, at least initially, further withdrawals (that never took place).

The new logic of the Israeli right-wing parties reveals itself as being far from the myth of the 'Great Israel:' Olmert declared publicly that Israel would go on existing as a Zionist and Jewish State only if the Territories were to be abandoned and the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel would take place (*Jerusalem Post*, January 3, 2008). The right-wing parties in Israel had never issued this proposal so clearly before. This does not means automatically that all the political area included among Likud, Kadima, Agudat Israel and Israel Beitenu will support this stance and follow soon. Besides, these proposals do not translate themselves automatically into a reduction of violence or into an overall decrease of conflict.

In the last years, a classic confrontation among States, such as occurred in the 1973, is regarded as very unlikely. However, the Arab–

Israeli conflict has not ceased to exist, but is active through other channels.

The first point to take into consideration is that Israel looks at the Arab world, and those States at Israel, as in a mirror: for the Arab States, Israel still remains a 'foreign body' in an otherwise homogeneous region, while Israel thinks of the Arab world as a cohesive pan-nation, a faint region, where a decision taken in Cairo may gain supporters in any other 'brother' State. Thus, the deep reasons for the conflict at the base of the Arab–Israeli wars have not yet been removed.

The second point is that, nowadays, States are active through secondary, alternative channels, as militia or armed groups more or less directly dependent on the State. Those groups are assigned the task of keeping the conflict running, but adjusting it to an average degree of violence which won't automatically lead to a States' confrontation. The Second Lebanon War is exactly displaying these features. It still presents an open problem, whose inner logic eludes external observers: a war that could never have been won (Hizbullah cannot be uprooted from Lebanon as an 'alien' body like the PLO in 1982), which didn't exploit sufficient means (only air shelling in order to minimize human losses), and which sets such overarching and impossible goals (the finding of the kidnapped soldiers, the upraising of the Shiite population of the South of Lebanon against Hizbullah) as to turn out incongruous (Inbar 2007).

Reflection is therefore needed upon the principle of deterrence and its practical translation in preemptive wars and unilateral withdrawals, which seems to point to a deep distress of the country in running political relations with other States, especially its Arab neighbours.

The political and economic leadership may have distanced themselves from religious and militaristic perspectives, but only to find shelter in a rather strong ethnocentrism which hinders their perception of the outside world. Israel no longer trusts anybody, considers war the only and more effective option at its disposal, and this not in order to change the regional balance or to achieve a definite victory, but only to hold to the temporary *status quo* and gain time for further unilateral choices to take place according to its security needs as re-formulated from time to time.

In this perspective also the Gaza War should be interpreted. The citizens of the Southern Negev, exposed to the rocket launches which highly compromise daily life's activities and the security of perception of individual Israeli civilians, have the right to lead a normal life, as do the citizens of whatever other Western country. The Israeli citizens do not look at the whole picture, but only at the detail: the rocket falling in the school yard while the students were only playing a basketball match. They do not think that those rockets represent something, are launched by a country at war which is advancing some request, to which perhaps the Israeli authorities could also give a different response.

Israel in this specific historical moment does not express any political perspective, but rather only a dubious tendency to look inward, a tendency in which the options of peace and war remains constantly open, with all the States, the armed groups and the militias that could prejudice the daily life security of the State through kidnapping a single civilian or injuring a single soldier.

No long-term analyses are worked out by either military or civilian authorities. What is left is a strong bond to survival and defense, drawn from the feeling the State stays always ready to start a war, if individuals' security is jeopardized.

The conclusion might be that, given the factual impossibility of realizing the 2-States solutions according to the UN plan due to the number of settlements in the West Bank, and taking into account the total absence of an internal debate on the follow-up of the Gaza War, the ethnocentric tendency of Israel and the inclination to look only inward is still far from ending.

Yet, the country would have all the required cultural, material and human resources to rouse itself from this oblivion and on the day when a strong political project would emerge again, able to present peace as a positive outcome and not as an external imposition, and to present Israel as a much more complex State than that of the uniform, monolithic image now pushed forward, the actual balance could swiftly shift to more open stances. The current dynamism of Israeli society in all the scientific and cultural fields and all the rich Jewish philosophical tradition show a strong critical inclination, tending towards a constant

reappraisal of both its thinking and its action, open to the outside world and to change.

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