Understanding Israel's Foreign Policy: Security in Theory and Application

By Josh Hayes

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Webster University
470 E Lockwood Ave, St. Louis, MO 63119, USA

Introduction

The October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks that resulted in the massacre of at least 1200 Israelis has again made an incredibly tough issue one of the primary concerns of policymakers focused on international security. The attacks were extremely gutting due to the barbaric nature of the murders and horrific images and stories that continue to come out every day. Because of the life altering events that took place that terrible day, it was understandable and most definitely expected what the response of the Israeli government would be. Despite the recent political turmoil in Israel, including an extremely controversial and un-democratic judicial overhaul, corruption charges against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the never-ending cycle of parliamentary elections that left no clear winners, the government was able to quickly unite to form a war cabinet. Despite this united front, there are real questions about how the Netanyahu government missed the many clear warning signs about the attacks, as well as the confirmed report that Egypt warned Israel about the attacks not long before they happened. It is widely expected that Netanyahu will be forced out following the conclusion of the initial stages of the war effort, but the Prime Minister seems to have as many political lives as a cat so that is unclear. There are also real questions about what the actual objectives of Israel should be and are in their military operation in Gaza. This paper will consider this question, but it is also necessary to understand what drove Israeli foreign policy before this. This paper will not dictate what Israeli foreign policy should be, but it will investigate what is possible while still reflecting the decades long foreign policy of Israel. This paper will argue that Israeli foreign policy, conducted through regional hybridism, is primarily driven by the state's desire for survival, which explains their posture towards their Arab neighbors, state and non-state actors alike.

Foreign Policy Driven by Security

What some fail to understand about Israeli foreign policy is that the actions taken by the Jewish state are driven entirely by its desire for survival. Ever since its inception as a state in 1948, it has faced the reality that many of its neighbors believe the Jewish state as well as its people do not have a right to exist. Failure to agree on a point as seemingly uncontroversial as this explains the psyche of Israelis. This escalates the stakes. Rather than just dealing with its political legitimacy, it also must consider the genocidal goals of its enemies. In other words, Israel faces both a political security threat, which is a threat to the legitimacy of the Jewish state, as well as a societal security threat, which is a threat to the identity and religion of the Israeli people. Through the lens of securitization theory in the Copenhagen School of security studies, it can be understood that security in its simplest form is about survival, and because the threats faced by Israel fall within both societal and political sectors, the threats are even more severe (Nyman, 2013).

To give a sense of how Israelis view their security dilemma, a popular metaphor from former Prime Minister of Israel Shimon Peres is often quoted. Peres said that "We need to protect ourselves from knives, tanks, and missiles." This has been interpreted to represent the three different threats Israel faces. The knives are the armed non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah; the tanks are the neighboring states; and the "missiles" are the potential large-scale weapons possessed by regional powers like Iran (Cohen et al., 1998).

Keeping these triple threat considerations in mind, it is easy to see how this translates to their IR policy. Some have argued that Israel's approach towards Palestine can best be understood by integrating realism and constructivism. Realism is best understood as the theory that states will pursue actions that are in their own best interests while constructivists believe that ideas and culture also influence states' decisions. In a paper on foreign policy from Israel's perspective, authors Mohammed Torki Bani Salameh and Ahmad Ishakat argue that the situation can be best understood using a blended approach called realist constructivism (Bani Salameh and Ishakat, 2022). They argue that realism helps us to understand how politics are conducted but constructivism helps us to examine how politics works, and they are correct. Of course, Israel acts as all other states do in pursuing their own national interests, but they also must deal with the social and cultural aspects that are unique to the Middle East. Failing to recognize this component means policymakers cannot correctly diagnose the problem.

Inside of Israel, there are different factions of Jews and different perceptions of security. There are Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, and Israeli Arabs, just to name a few, and they all have different concerns. Orthodox Jews may be most concerned about preserving Jewish identity and thus will be wary of any solution that recognizes a Palestinian state due to demographic concerns. Secular Jews and Israeli Arabs, on the other hand, may be more amenable to a two-state solution, but still sensitive to concerns about threats to the Jewish ethnicity. These differences can all be attributed to culture and identity, as well as the fact that the Jewish state is not homogenous, which explains the need for a balanced IR theory in understanding the foreign policy of Israel.

IR Theory Into Practice Through Regional Hybridism

In keeping with the theme of balanced approaches, Israel represents a rare state that has been increasing their conventional military capabilities for engagements with non-state actors and aggressive neighbors while also implementing more hybrid warfare tactics for other states and actors. This approach, dubbed regional hybridism, involves only needing conventional tactics in one's own region while using hybrid warfare to conduct covert operations as well as achieve political goals through less democratic means (Carment and Belo, 2018). This type of policy is the result of decades of hard lessons learned and reflects an Israeli understanding of what has traditionally worked for them and what hasn't.

For Israel to be successful in achieving their foreign policy goals in a hostile environment, they must be capable of both competent and efficient military operations as well as covert tactics to

gather information and deter threats. But this is not an even split and has required balancing over time. At times when Israel has become too dependent on one tactic, they have had to deal with security failures. Because of this, Israel's roughly 75-year history has seen swings towards both ends of the spectrum from heavy handed conventional military tactics in asymmetric wars to decreased conventional capabilities causing military and political embarrassments.

For much of Israel's initial history, the constant hostilities they engaged in primarily involved conventional military operations. Many of the wars fought pre-1970s were about the survival of the Jewish state, raising the stakes of the operations. These operations were all successful which created an environment for a less securitized state. Because of an improvement in relations with neighboring states like Egypt, survival of the state seemed like less of a threat and conventional military tactics began to wane. As Carment and Belo note, however, though Israel has not engaged in conventional warfare directly with its neighbors since 1973, the hostilities with other non-state actors have continued, but in an asymmetrical way (Carment and Belo, 2018). The perceived weakness of the opponent allowed Israel to scale back its military forces and instead focus on counterterrorism, intelligence, and other aspects of hybrid warfare.

For example, one of Israel's well known hybrid warfare tactics is assassination. One of Israel's primary foreign policy goals is preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. But rather than striking Iranian nuclear sites, which is theoretically an option, they have employed more covert tactics. Israel's Mossad has taken credit for killing Iranian nuclear scientists and they were also more recently suspected to have killed Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the head of the Iranian nuclear program, which set the program back years (Bani Salameh and Ishakat, 2022). They have also used assassinations to control the day-to-day security on the ground in Gaza, showing they have the might to conduct these operations outside their own borders.

The Israeli policy of decreasing military resources and increasing hybrid tactics appeared to be working for some time. But the belief among Israeli policymakers and military leaders that defunding conventional military resources while increasing its ability to conduct covert operations would be enough to provide security was extremely shortsighted. In the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, the Israeli military was exposed for its tactical weaknesses as well as the failures in both the military and political echelons to determine what the purpose of the war was. Using history as a guide, it will be determined later if the same is occurring now in their 2023 War with Hamas.

2006 Israel Hezbollah War

Triggered by the killing and kidnapping of IDF soldiers in a cross-border raid, the Second Israel-Lebanon War began and was marred by airstrikes, rockets, and many civilian casualties. While the war was in many ways a continuation of previous conflict, it is also seen by some as the first battle in the emerging proxy war between Israel and Iran. A key part of any war is deciding what the goals of the war actually are. That proved to be very difficult in the 2006 conflict, and I

will argue that history is repeating itself now. Early in the war, Israel's cabinet announced its goals would include getting back its kidnapped soldiers, getting Hezbollah to withdraw from the region, having Lebanon deploy its military in the South to quell the situation, a heavy blow to Hezbollah, and "victory," an extremely ambiguous term (Tzabag, 2013). No real thought was given to what the termination of hostilities by the military and political leadership would look like and it showed. Though the war was short lived, it was in no way a success despite the conflict being completely asymmetric. The coming months and years included a dissecting of the war in Israel and what changes needed to be made to improve their security.

Winograd Commission Report

The Winograd Report, which analyzed the failures and successes of the 2006 War with Hezbollah was a great shock to Israelis and served as a giant wake up call to political and military leadership. Emblematic of the mismanagement was the government's inability to even recognize that they were fighting a war, as they did not use the term when discussing the conflict. And while the commission failed to place blame at the feet of any specific public individuals, it did serve as helpful in understanding what went wrong and served as a roadmap for future changes. Despite offering no specific recommendations, the report did find that the war was initiated irresponsibly and was managed with incompetence. Additionally, it found that the war was entered into without any comprehensive combat plan or the setting of any necessary goals or constraints (Navot, 2009). It also placed aim directly on the decreased military capabilities of the IDF and its inability to conduct full ground operations. Specifically, it found that a more forceful and air-backed frontal assault would be the best way to reduce Israeli deaths both in combat and civilians back home (Eshel, 2008).

By understanding these failures, the Israelis implemented a major shift in their application of hybrid warfare. A greater balance was needed between conventional military abilities and hybrid tactics. And because of these failures the balance was shifted. The IDF is still not perfect, especially given the makeup of its soldiers, but it has improved its capabilities. It is important to note however, that Israel's balancing of hybrid tactics and implementation of IR theory is not the only thing that has changed. Most importantly, and perhaps, most devastating to any hope for future peace in the region is the change in how war is conducted by the Israelis, known as the Dahiya Doctrine.

Dahiya Doctrine and Disproportionate Force

The Dahiya Doctrine was borne out of the failures of the IDF to strike hard at Hezbollah in 2006. In a report for Tel Aviv University, former Israeli colonel Gabriel Siboni argued for a change in wartime tactics away from proportional responses and instead to disproportionate ones. Siboni argued that instead of getting bogged down in a war of attrition, the IDF should use all of its might to strike at both Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip to avoid the "cat and mouse games" and put a high level of fear into the policymakers of these enemies (Siboni,

2008). In other words, he argued that by striking at targets with more might than their enemies are even capable of, this will create a strong deterrent to attack Israel. And while it is true a strong deterrent should be key to Israeli foreign policy, one could see how this doctrine of bombardment could cause chaotic and undesirable consequences for innocent civilians.

In response to hostilities between Israel and Hamas in 2008, a UN report criticized Israel for its military offensive that was, "a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population, radically diminish its local economic capacity both to work and to provide for itself, and to force upon it an ever-increasing sense of dependency and vulnerability" (Tharoor, 2023). The criticism is that Israel's heavy-handed attacks, that are claimed to be a response and intended to be a deterrent, are actually just a collective punishment that is eroding human rights in the area and not actually deterring continued terrorist attacks against their own civilians.

Application to 2023 War with Hamas

Given the rise of blatant antisemitism in academic settings and internationally at large, it is pertinent to first say that the barbaric terrorist attacks committed by Hamas on October 7 and since then with their treatment of hostages are completely abhorrent. Israel was attacked within its own borders and innocent civilians, some not even Israeli or Jewish were the targets. Given the scope and nature of the attacks, Israel, of course, has a right to defend itself. As this paper has discussed, Israel's primary security goal is its survival and it appears this fight with Hamas, given its proximity and connections to Iran, will be yet another war of survival. But in order to reduce casualties, prevent the war from spreading, and preserve hope for the future, attention must be paid to lessons of the past.

It is unclear to the international community and policymakers what Israel's end goal is in this conflict. Israeli leaders have described the destruction of Hamas as the goal, but this seems rather broad and unattainable. Hamas is funded by Iran and their supplies will be replenished until Iran decides to stop, whether of their own accord or being forced to. The ground invasion of Gaza has been argued to be the only possible way to achieve this goal due to the complex tunnel system Hamas uses underneath Gaza. This operation already appears to be a continuation of the Dahiya Doctrine and thousands of civilians have already lost and will continue to lose their lives due to the density of the Gaza Strip. So, is the destruction of Hamas attainable?

This paper would echo what many Middle East analysts believe to be true, and that is, it depends on the scope of the word destruction. The leadership can be killed, the structure can be destroyed, but the ideology cannot. Experts have also argued that for any operation to be successful, it is imperative to create a schism between the Palestinian population and Hamas. Doing so would likely require there being a broad belief of the possibility for a Palestinian state in the near future (CSIS, 2023). But it is clear that this is currently not happening. Instead, the Israelis are painting Gazans and Palestinians with a broad brush and because of this are causing

Hamas to actually be more favorable to the Arab world. This creates the added danger that the ideology of Hamas will only grow stronger. And because of this, the region is likely to see a prolonged war with both sides feeling they are fighting for their survival.

To be clear, this paper is not endorsing a permanent ceasefire, nor is it saying that Israel should "turn Gaza into a parking lot," as irresponsible American politicians have said (Middle East Monitor, 2023). What it is instead saying is that the current trajectory of this conflict is eerily similar to previous hostilities involving Israel, in which disproportionate force is used causing endless civilian casualties and clear military and political objectives are either nonexistent or unattainable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Israel's foreign policy can best be understood by the threats to their political and societal security. The security of the state and its people are the driving force behind foreign policy decisions. Through a balanced realist and constructivist lens of international relations, it can be understood that in addition to concern for their own power and survival, culture and identity also play a role in their foreign policy, especially in relations with neighboring Arab nations. Israel has implemented this foreign policy approach through a phenomenon called regional hybridism, which involves the increased usage of more conventional military tactics in specific geographical areas close to home, while relying more on covert operations in neighboring states as well as non-state actors. The challenge has been finding the right balance of tactics, and this challenge was heightened due to failures in the 2006 Israel Hezbollah War that were exposed in the 2008 Winograd Commission Report. As a result, more focus has been given to conventional military tactics as well as a change in deterrence strategy that involves disproportionate force. The results of this new military doctrine are not yet clear however, as the new policy is causing significantly more civilian casualties while not decisively depleting the structure of its enemies and further souring its relationship with Palestinian and Arab neighbors. In its latest war with Hamas, Israel must attempt to take lessons from history and avoid its mistakes of the past. In order for Israel to achieve its primary foreign policy goal, security and survival, it must accept that the harmful ideology that wishes it harm will only be defeated when there is a belief in the Arab world that an opportunity for a political horizon is imminently on the table and thus a more constructive solution than the continued attacks on Israel's sovereignty.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Hayes is an undergraduate student studying in Political Science at Webster University in St. Louis, USA. He is currently a Don Maland Researcher in International Conflict Analysis and Resolution. His research focus is on stability in the Middle East, specifically in Israel and Palestine. With his policy-oriented research, he hopes to provide analysis for the underlying conflicts that have shaped the region for centuries as well as propose a framework for future pathways to peace and stability. Additionally, he is working on a research paper that explores the foreign policy of Israel and its impact on the broader region and global stakeholders.

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The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.