

# FROM BEN-GURION TO NETANYAHU: THE EVOLUTION OF ISRAEL'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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Every White House has an official National Security Strategy (NSS) thanks to the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.<sup>1</sup> The law mandates annual revisions to the NSS, but the accepted practice is for the White House to publish a new strategy every four years. The public nature of the strategy ensures that the document is full of platitudes. Nonetheless, the requirement to produce the NSS ensures that each president's national security team conducts a thorough review of U.S. foreign and defense policy. The resulting document represents, at least in principle, the authoritative view of the commander in chief.

Israel, despite being a country that is under constant threat and thus in constant need of updated national security strategies, has officially released only one such document. David Ben-Gurion, the country's first prime minister, wrote Israel's first and only officially approved national security document. It was the product of approximately seven weeks of work in 1953, when he took a leave of absence to write it in his small home in the southern desert kibbutz of Sde Boker.

Since then, Israel has not published an official, updated security concept. There were at least three serious attempts, which this report details. None, however, were successful in becoming official Israeli government documents.

Israel is now on the cusp of producing a new national security strategy. It will likely become the first document of its kind since 1953. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally wrote the document, with the assistance of his top advisors and close staff (including the National Security Council and military secretariat) and in consultation with several experts. The document reflects his formidable understanding of Israeli security after 13 years (10 consecutive) in office. Although the document is largely classified, Netanyahu has shared some of its elements with the public.

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1. Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Pub. L. 99-433, 100 Stat. 992, codified as amended at 99 U.S.C. ([https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/dod\\_reforms/Goldwater-NicholsDoDRReordAct1986.pdf](https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/dod_reforms/Goldwater-NicholsDoDRReordAct1986.pdf))

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In the Israeli system of government, it is nearly impossible to compose, let alone publish, such a document. A sitting prime minister is likely the only person able to accomplish such a task, as Ben-Gurion did more than 60 years ago. This explains, in part, why Netanyahu took time away from the rigors of his demanding position to personally write this document. But Netanyahu also took this opportunity to deliver a clear message to Israel's enemies. The document makes it clear that new threats will be met with new defense policies. Indeed, Israel has become a strong regional power, and this national security strategy is designed to convey this in no uncertain terms.

This FDD research product tracks the evolution of Israel's defense and security strategy and provides a glimpse of the known elements of Netanyahu's new strategy. Whether or not the new strategy will ultimately be embraced as official doctrine remains to be seen.

## **THE IRON WALL**

As early as 1923, Zionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky predicted that the local Arabs would refuse to accept a Jewish majority in mandatory Palestine. He understood a simple fact: Never in history had an indigenous group of people accepted the presence of a relatively new group on their declared property without resistance. Jabotinsky derided those who believed that peace would be achieved by watering down Jewish goals or through economic concessions. He claimed that the Arabs understood that Zionism did not seek to oppress them. Still, they rejected renewed Jewish settlement in mandatory Palestine for fear of losing their demographic majority.<sup>2</sup>

Jabotinsky also rejected Zionist attempts to circumvent the Palestinian Arabs and reach agreements with the Arab states. He believed the Jews lacked the political means, while the Arabs remained committed to preserving an Arab Palestine. With the understanding that Jewish settlement would need to continue nonetheless, he concluded that the Jews would need to erect "The Iron Wall" – his metaphor for ironclad defense. Hostile Arab populations would need to learn, he posited, that this wall was impenetrable. Indeed, he argued that peace would only be possible if the surrounding Arabs saw the utter futility in violence or war. Thus, Jabotinsky argued, the "Iron Wall" had to be first strengthened, notions of immediate peace needed to be abandoned, and only through de facto peace could future dialogue take place.<sup>3</sup>

Jabotinsky remains a controversial figure in Israel's history. But his ideas were important to understanding Israel's political and defense positions in the years leading up to the 1948-1949 war of independence, and beyond.

## **THE OLD MAN WEIGHS IN**

It is hard to view Israel's ability to survive the onslaught of seven Arab armies in the war of independence as anything less than a miracle. But Israel's leadership refused to rely only on acts of God. The country's first prime minister stepped away from the demands of his job, retreated to his home in Sde Boker, and drafted the country's first and only official defense and security concept in 1953.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall," November 4, 1923, translation accessed via the Jewish Virtual Library on May 6, 2019. (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-the-iron-wall-quot>)

3. Ibid.

4. Isaac Ben-Israel, *Israel Defence Doctrine* (Israeli Ministry of Defense, 2013).

Ben-Gurion relied in part on Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" concept in delineating the security doctrine of his small, nascent country. In this document, the "Old Man," as Ben-Gurion was often called, made a number of observations that, in part, still hold true today:

Israel faces a long-term existential threat from hostile nations that surround it. Israel must always be prepared because it cannot afford to lose a single war. All military confrontations between Israel and the Arab nations are rounds of violence in a continuous war. Israel, because of size and location, will always struggle from an inherent geographic and demographic asymmetry. Therefore, Israel's standing army must be prepared to respond to every threat scenario until reserves can be mobilized. The air force must also provide time and space for the reserves to mobilize. Israeli intelligence must be excellent to be able to predict new threats and supply early warning. In the event of war, Israel must take the fight to the enemy territory, to both prevent civilian casualties and to attempt to shorten the duration of any conflict.

## **NEW THREATS**

Ben-Gurion's defense doctrine embodied three principles, or pillars: deterrence, early warning, and offensive power. These principles are still the cornerstone of Israeli defense. However, some of Ben-Gurion's ideas have been eclipsed, particularly in recent years. Notably, Israel no longer faces short-term existential threats. Its military is vastly superior to those of its neighbors. Additionally, a decline in conventional "classic" warfare confrontations pits Israel against primarily terrorist groups or proxies of enemy states. These enemies have internalized Israel's security doctrine and now seek to counter it by extending the duration of conflict and bringing the fight to inside Israel's borders. They do so through asymmetric warfare that includes the use of terrorism in Israel and abroad; guerrilla and close-range conflict; short- and medium-range anti-tank missiles, rockets, and other projectiles; and cross-border tunnels to facilitate weapon systems smuggling and commando attacks.

These terrorist campaigns have made it difficult for Israel to be able to declare victory decisively. Indeed, for these terror groups, merely surviving is a major victory. These campaigns have also made it clear to Israel that it is now engaged in continuous war (war between wars). And as these groups acquire better weaponry, Israel must now think more about defending the home front, as well as critical infrastructure and government institutions. Thus, Israel's security doctrine has shifted over time, even if these shifts have not been explicitly articulated in official documents.

## **ATTEMPTS TO UPDATE THE NSS**

For more than four decades, Ben-Gurion's Sde Boker document remained the first and only successful attempt to spell out Israel's security doctrine on paper. The reason for this lies in the structure of the Israeli system. Unlike in the U.S. system, which mandates regular iterations of the NSS, the Israeli system does not. If anything, the Israeli political system almost serves as a deterrent. The process involves gaining buy-in from clashing political figures about controversial and sensitive security matters, with significant political, economic (budget), and social implications, as well. Some might also argue that Ben-Gurion's successors (who largely hailed from his Labor party) wished to respect his legacy, and thus declined to supplant his work. But a more compelling explanation is that Israel lacked the bureaucratic infrastructure. Israel did not even have a National Security Council (NSC) until the mid-1990s. It was then that the Israeli bureaucracy launched efforts to create a new NSS.

In 1998, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai charged Maj. Gen. (Res.) David Ivri (who became the first national security advisor) with heading a taskforce to update the defense and security concept. Ivri divided the taskforce into five subcommittees: deterrence, decisive victory, and early warning; military-civilian relations; military policy

and community relations; strategic issues; and technology. The taskforce included heavyweights from within the Israeli security establishment. Only some of the taskforce subcommittees were able to complete and partially publish their work. But the integrative team, responsible for issuing the overall security concept for approval, was unable to complete its mission. The process resulted in a clash among the five teams, and an inability to distill the many challenges they identified into a single document. The team dissolved once Mordechai concluded his term.

In 2004, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz appointed longtime Israeli politician Dan Meridor (who was one of the five subcommittee leaders on the 1998 taskforce) to head an expert committee to produce an updated Israeli defense and security concept. Meridor, having learned a lesson from the previous failure, created only one committee (instead of five), comprising more than 15 experts and security personnel from the military, government, bureaucracy, academia, and other fields. In 2006, Meridor submitted a classified and detailed 250-page report to the prime minister, the defense minister, the general staff, the Israel Security Agency, the Mossad, and other security agencies. The team's conclusions were also never adopted or approved – likely because of the clash of the budgetary, political, and defense implications of their findings, and a sense that the final product was too heavily oriented around the priorities of the Ministry of Defense, compared to other stakeholders. Still, elements of the report remain central to Israel's security doctrine, particularly in the area of the new pillar called “defense.”

In August 2015, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, published an IDF strategy document, which, among other things, delineated the strategic and tactical military threats to Israel, the IDF's selected courses of action to various conflict scenarios, and the relations/subordination between the military and political echelons.<sup>5</sup> Although it is not an official defense and security strategy, this document provides some key insights that have since been accepted as an important part of the defense doctrine, at least in the eyes of the military leaders.

That same year, the NSC submitted a proposal, led by the head of the defense and security concept division, Col. (Res.) Gur Layish, to update the security concept.<sup>6</sup> The draft dealt mainly with the differences between routine and emergencies, noting that Ben-Gurion's document, and subsequent attempts to revise it, mainly addressed the threat of war and times of emergency. This document also addressed issues related to early warning, deterring terrorism, and the definition of “decisive victory.” Perhaps most importantly, the document addressed the need for Israel to prolong calm for as long as possible, even if that meant absorbing low-level violence, but always preparing for a clear and unequivocal victory once hostilities erupt. Once again, however, the NSC failed to gain approval to publish this document after it began to circulate within the defense bureaucracy.

## NETANYAHU'S TURN

In 2017, Netanyahu, then the second-longest ruling prime minister in Israel's history (after Ben-Gurion), began to express a desire to personally produce a national security strategy, with the assistance of his top advisors and close staff (including the NSC and military secretariat) and in consultation with several experts. He completed the document last year. He presented the main points to the cabinet, to various bodies in the security establishment,

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5. IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, “אסטרטגיית צה"ל” (The IDF's Strategy),” *Israel Defense Forces*, August 2015. (<https://www.idf.il/media/5679/צהלה-אסטרטגיית-צהלה.pdf>); IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, “אסטרטגיית צה"ל” (The IDF's Strategy),” *Israel Defense Forces*, April 2018. (<https://www.idf.il/media/34416/strategy.pdf>)

6. Col. (Res.) Gur Layish, “עיקרי תפיסת הביטחון של המטה לביטחון לאומי - לשגרה ולהירום” (Main Points of the National Security Council's Security Concept – For Routine and Emergency),” *Eshonot*, July 2015. (<http://maarachot.idf.il/PDF/FILES/9/113729.pdf>)

and to the relevant Knesset committees. He has discussed some of its unclassified contents on several occasions, including at a National Security College graduation ceremony and most recently at the Jerusalem Globes Conference in December 2018.<sup>7</sup> In time, he will likely share more publically.

Now, after winning the ability to form a new coalition following the April 2019 election, and approaching the point in time when he will surpass Ben-Gurion as the longest-ruling prime minister, this document is intended to serve as the prime minister's lighthouse for the security community when preparing their annual and long-term plans. From what can be gleaned from the unclassified sections, elements of the document are simply codifications of existing doctrine. However, Netanyahu has laid out several new concepts, as well. The following is a summary of what is known and unclassified:

First, Netanyahu lays out what some might consider to be platitudes. But they are nonetheless the rules by which Israel operates in the Middle East. He summarizes the brutal fact that the weak cannot survive in the Middle East. He thus observes that Israel must fortify its strength and increase its relative advantage, especially facing the inherent asymmetry vis-à-vis its enemies. He classifies primary and secondary alliances, and he notes that policy must be crafted accordingly.

Netanyahu asserts that Israel's security rests on four main pillars. The first pillar is military power, which derives from deterrence, early warning, defense, and offensive capabilities. The second pillar is economic power, which derives from strengthening the private sector, removing obstacles to trade and commerce, and strengthening global economic ties. The third pillar is political power, which derives from strong alliances, deterrence, ensuring that the Israeli military has a free hand to operate, and eroding the reflexively anti-Israel majority in international organizations. The final pillar Netanyahu describes as social and spiritual power, which might be better characterized as human capital, noting the resiliency of the Israeli people.

According to Netanyahu, it is crucial to deploy all four pillars to address Israel's main threats from state, non-state, and terrorist enemies. Nuclear-armed enemies are, of course, the greatest threat among these. Other recent threats include precision-guided munitions (PGM), new cyber challenges, potential erosion of readiness on the home front, and persistent efforts to delegitimize Israel through boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaigns and lawfare at the International Criminal Court or similar venues.

Looking to the future, the Israeli premier believes that Israel must nurture its human capital and ensure that outstanding individuals stay in service longer. In addition, Israel must ensure that its technological and operational capabilities remain vastly superior to its enemies. Parallel to the continued disproportional investment in intelligence and the air force, Netanyahu calls for building a significant ground force. He notes that similar excellence must be ensured in the areas of robotics, drones, and other technologies that enable Israel to operate deep into enemy territory.

Netanyahu notes that other crucial advances are required to protect the civilian population. This includes anti-rocket, anti-missile, anti-tunnel, and advanced barrier technology. It also includes technology that will insure continuity of operations by protecting Israel's military and critical infrastructure. Netanyahu believes that Israel

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7. Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "Excerpt from PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Globes Business Conference," December 19, 2018. ([http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Events/Pages/event\\_globes191218.aspx](http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Events/Pages/event_globes191218.aspx))

must maintain its superior cyber capabilities while also devising a better way to defend against de-legitimization and to improve Israel's public relations.

Finally, Netanyahu delineates his principles and guidelines for Israel's use of force. First, he notes that force can and should be deployed to counter any existential threat. But he further notes the need for swift and deadly capabilities to minimize harm to the home front, thereby denying the enemy substantial achievements, undermining its capabilities, and sapping its will to continue fighting. In keeping with Ben-Gurion's original vision, Israel must also be able to defeat many enemies in a multi-front war.

Consistent with other attempts at creating a national security strategy, Netanyahu identifies the need to maintain readiness for the "war between wars." He sees the importance of protecting Israeli territory from terrorism. And as the leader of the Jewish state, he continues to see Israel's role as the protector of Jewish communities worldwide.

In the area of moral war fighting, Israel remains a pioneer. It continues to prevent civilian casualties to the greatest extent possible, and Netanyahu seeks to maintain that policy. However, he notes that there will not be immunity for the masterminds of terrorist attacks, other aggressors and their dispatchers. Nor will Israel shy away from striking at an enemy's host country and its critical infrastructure if it means shortening the duration of conflict.

This last point is likely the most important one. It is a clear message to the world about the way Israel plans to respond to strategic and existential threats, as well as large-scale terror attacks. Military commanders have previously implied this message in statements. But now, Netanyahu has enshrined it in a document that will likely serve as official Israeli policy for years to come.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are, of course, classified elements that will never see the light of day. But the goal now for Netanyahu is to ensure that this document becomes the main set of rules for the security community when planning their force buildup and operations.

Netanyahu may be a polarizing political figure to some. However, his 13-year run as prime minister has made him a valuable asset to the defense establishment. His institutional memory and understanding of Israel's many challenges makes him the ideal candidate to produce such a document. As such, it is likely that this document will serve as an important guide for planning, budgeting, and building for years to come.