




# ISRAEL AT RISK

*A Commentary  
Special Report*

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There is a sense among Israel's friends and supporters that the Jewish state is threatened as it has not been since its earliest days after independence was declared in 1948, despite the unparalleled freedom and prosperity that have made its existence one of the miraculous facts of the age. There is, of course, a very specific danger posed by Iran's nuclear program—with the growing likelihood that Israel will find itself in the crosshairs of the world's deadliest weapon. Though it is the most pressing, the nuclear crisis is not the only one Israel is facing. This COMMENTARY SPECIAL REPORT presents a wide-ranging portrait of the risks to Israel. Turn the page to begin. 





# Seven Existential Threats

Iran and terrorism are the most immediate, but several domestic crises also pose a mortal danger to Israel's future.

By Michael B. Oren

**R**ARELY in modern history have nations faced genuine existential threats. Wars are waged to change regimes, alter borders, acquire resources, and impose ideologies, but almost never to eliminate another state and its people.

This was certainly the case during World War II, in which the Allies sought to achieve the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan and to oust their odious leaders, but never to destroy the German and Japa-

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MICHAEL B. OREN, *a distinguished fellow at the Shalem Center and a professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, is the author of Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present. He wishes to thank Rafael Frankel for his assistance in preparing this article.*

nese states or to annihilate their populations. In the infrequent cases in which modern states were threatened with their survival, the experience proved to be traumatic in the extreme. Military coups, popular uprisings, and civil strife are typical by-products of a state's encounter with even a single existential threat.

The State of Israel copes not only with one but with at least seven existential threats on a daily basis. These threats are extraordinary not only for their number but also for their diversity. In addition to external military dangers from hostile regimes and organizations, the Jewish State is endangered by domestic opposition, demographic trends, and the erosion of core values. Indeed, it is difficult if not impossible to find an example of another state in the modern epic that has faced such a multiplicity and variety of concurrent existential threats.

## **The Loss of Jerusalem.**

The preservation of Jerusalem as the political and spiritual capital of the Jewish state is vital to Israel's

existence. This fact was well understood by David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, at the time of the state's creation in 1948. Though Israel was attacked simultaneously on all fronts by six Arab armies, with large sections of the Galilee and the Negev already lost, Ben-Gurion devoted the bulk of Israel's forces to breaking the siege of Jerusalem. The city, he knew, represented the *raison d'être* of the Jewish state, and without it Israel would be merely another miniature Mediterranean enclave not worth living in, much less defending.

Ben-Gurion's axiom proved correct: For more than 60 years, Jerusalem has formed the nucleus of Israel's national identity and cohesion. But now, for the first time since 1948, Israel is in danger of losing Jerusalem—not to Arab forces but to a combination of negligence and lack of interest.

Jerusalem no longer boasts a Zionist majority. Out of a total population of 800,000, there are 272,000 Arabs and 200,000 Haredim—ultra-Orthodox Jews who do not generally identify with the Zionist state. Recent years have seen the flight of thousands of secular Jews from the city, especially professionals and young couples. This exodus has severely eroded the city's tax base, making Jerusalem Israel's poorest city. Add this to the lack of industry and the prevalence of terrorist attacks and it is easy to see why Jerusalem is hardly a magnet for young Israelis. Indeed, virtually half of all Israelis under 18 have never even visited Jerusalem.

If this trend continues, Ben-Gurion's nightmare will materialize and Israel will be rendered soulless, a country in which a great many Jews may not want to live or for which they may not be willing to give their lives.

## **The Arab Demographic Threat.**

Estimates of the Arab growth rate, both within Israel and the West Bank and Gaza, vary widely. A maximalist school holds that the Palestinian population on both sides of the 1949 armistice lines is expanding far more rapidly than the Jewish sector and will surpass it in less than a decade. Countering this claim, a minimalist school insists that the Arab birthrate in Israel is declining and that the population of the territories, because of emigration, is also shrinking.

Even if the minimalist interpretation is largely correct, it cannot alter a situation in which Israeli Arabs currently constitute one-fifth of the country's population—one-quarter of the population under age 19—and in which the West Bank now contains at least 2 million Arabs.

Israel, the Jewish State, is predicated on a decisive and stable Jewish majority of at least 70 percent. Any lower than that and Israel will have to decide between being a Jewish state and a democratic state. If it chooses

democracy, then Israel as a Jewish state will cease to exist. If it remains officially Jewish, then the state will face an unprecedented level of international isolation, including sanctions, that might prove fatal.

Ideally, the remedy for this dilemma lies in separate states for Jews and Palestinian Arabs. The basic conditions for such a solution, however, are unrealizable for the foreseeable future. The creation of Palestinian government, even within the parameters of the deal proposed by President Clinton in 2000, would require the removal of at least 100,000 Israelis from their West Bank homes. The evacuation of a mere 8,100 Israelis from Gaza in 2005 required 55,000 IDF troops—the largest Israeli military operation since the 1973 Yom Kippur War—and was profoundly traumatic. And unlike the biblical heartland of Judaea and Samaria, which is now called the West Bank, Gaza has never been universally regarded as part of the historical Land of Israel.

On the Palestinian side there is no single leadership at all, and certainly not one ready to concede the demand for the repatriation of Palestinian refugees to Israel or to forfeit control of even part of the Temple Mount (a necessary precondition for a settlement that does not involve the division of Jerusalem). No Palestinian leader, even the most moderate, has recognized Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state or even the existence of a Jewish people.

In the absence of a realistic two-state paradigm, international pressure will grow to transform Israel into a binational state. This would spell the end of the Zionist project. Confronted with the lawlessness and violence endemic to other one-state situations in the Middle East such as Lebanon and Iraq, multitudes of Israeli Jews will emigrate.

## **Delegitimization.**

Since the mid-1970s, Israel's enemies have waged an increasingly successful campaign of delegitimizing Israel in world forums, intellectual and academic circles, and the press. The campaign has sought to depict Israel as a racist, colonialist state that proffers extraordinary rights to its Jewish citizens and denies fundamental freedoms to the Arabs. These accusations have found their way into standard textbooks on the Middle East and have become part of the daily discourse at the United Nations and other influential international organizations. Most recently, Israel has been depicted as an apartheid state, effectively comparing the Jewish State to South Africa under its former white supremacist regime. Many of Israel's counterterrorism efforts are branded as war crimes, and Israeli generals are indicted by foreign courts.

Though the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza clearly contributed to the tarnishing of Israel's image, increasingly the delegitimization campaign focuses not on Israel's policy in the territories but on its essence as the Jewish national state.

Such calumny was, in the past, dismissed as harmless rhetoric. But as the delegitimization of Israel gained prominence, the basis was laid for international measures to isolate Israel and punish it with sanctions similar to those that brought down the South African regime. The academic campaigns to boycott Israeli universities and intellectuals are adumbrations of the type of strictures that could destroy Israel economically and deny it the ability to defend itself against the existential threats posed by terrorism and Iran.

## **Terrorism.**

Since the moment of its birth, Israel has been the target of attacks—bombings, ambushes, rocket fire—from Arab irregulars committed to its destruction. In the decade between 1957 and 1967, widely considered the most halcyon in the state's history, hundreds of Israelis were killed in such assaults. Nevertheless, the Israeli security establishment viewed terror as a nuisance that, though at times tormenting, did not threaten the state's survival.

This assessment changed, however, in the fall of 2000, when the Palestinians responded to an Israeli-American offer of statehood in the West Bank and Gaza with an onslaught of drive-by shootings and suicide bombings. Tourists and foreign capital fled the country as a result, and Israelis were literally locked inside their homes. The state was dying.

Israel eventually rallied and, in the spring of 2002, mounted a counteroffensive against terrorist strongholds in the West Bank and Gaza. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) developed innovative techniques for patrolling Palestinian cities, coordinating special forces and intelligence units, and targeting terrorist leaders. Israel also built a separation barrier that impeded the ability of terrorists to infiltrate the state from the east.

These measures succeeded in virtually eliminating suicide bombers and restoring economic and social stability. Yet no sooner were these historic achievements gained than terrorists alit on a new tactic no less threatening to Israel's existence.

Katyusha rockets fired by Hezbollah into northern Israel and Qassam rockets fired by Hamas in the south rendered life in large swaths of Israel emotionally untenable. Though Israeli ground and air operations may have succeeded in temporarily deterring such attacks, Israel has yet to devise a 21st-century remedy for these

mid-20th century threats.

Moreover, Hezbollah's and Hamas's arsenals now contain rockets capable of hitting every Israeli city. If fired simultaneously, these rockets could knock out Israel's airport, destroy its economy, spur a mass exodus from the country, and perhaps trigger a chain reaction in which some Israeli Arabs and several Middle Eastern states join in the assault. Israel's attempts to defend itself, for example by invading Lebanon and Gaza, would be condemned internationally, and serve as pretext for delegitimizing the state. Israel's survival would be threatened.

## **A Nuclear-Armed Iran.**

The principal sponsor of Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran is inextricably linked to the terrorist threat. But when the Islamic Republic achieves nuclear weapons-capability—as early as this year, according to Israeli intelligence estimates—the threat will amplify manifold.

A nuclear-armed Iran creates not one but several existential threats. The most manifest emanates from Iran's routinely declared desire to “wipe Israel off the map,” and from the fact that cold war calculi of nuclear deterrence through mutually assured destruction may not apply to Islamist radicals eager for martyrdom. Some Israeli experts predict that the Iranian leadership would be willing to sacrifice 50 percent of their countrymen in order to eradicate Israel.

Beyond the perils of an Iranian first-strike attack against Israel, the possibility exists that Iran will transfer its nuclear capabilities to terrorist groups, which will then unleash them on Israel via the country's porous ports and border crossings.

A nuclear Iran will also deny Israel the ability to respond to terrorist attacks: in response to an Israeli retaliation against Hezbollah, for example, Iran would go on nuclear alert, causing widespread panic in Israel and the collapse of its economy. Finally, and most menacing, many Middle Eastern states have declared their intention to develop nuclear capabilities of their own once Iran acquires the bomb.

Israel will swiftly find itself in a profoundly unstable nuclear neighborhood prone to violent revolutions and miscalculations leading to war. As former Labor Party minister Efraim Sneh says, under such circumstances, all Israelis who can leave the country will.

## **The Hemorrhaging of Sovereignty.**

Israel does not assert its sovereignty over large sections of its territory and over major sectors of its population. In East Jerusalem, a few hundred yards from where Israeli building codes are strictly enforced in

West Jerusalem, Arabs have illegally built hundreds of houses, many of them in historic areas, with impunity. The situation is even worse in the Negev and throughout much of the Galilee, where vast tracts of land have been seized by illegal construction and squatters. Taxes are erratically collected in these areas and the police maintain, at best, a symbolic presence.

Israel fails to apply its laws not only to segments of its Arab population but to significant parts of its Jewish community as well. Over 100 outposts have been established illegally in the West Bank, and Jewish settler violence perpetrated against Palestinian civilians and Israeli security forces is now regarded as a major threat by the IDF.

Israel also balks at enforcing many of its statutes in the burgeoning Haredi community. (According to a recent report, by the year 2012, Haredim will account for one-third of all the Jewish elementary school students in Israel.) Though it is difficult to generalize about Israeli Haredim, the community overwhelmingly avoids military service and eschews the symbols of the state.

A significant percentage of Knesset members, Arabs and Jews, do not recognize the validity of the state they serve. Some actively call for its dissolution. Israel is, quite simply, hemorrhaging sovereignty and so threatening its continued existence as a state.

## **Corruption.**

Recent years have witnessed the indictment of major Israeli leaders on charges of embezzlement, taking bribes, money laundering, sexual harassment, and even rape. Young Israelis shun politics, which are widely perceived as cutthroat; the Knesset, according to annual surveys, commands the lowest level of respect of any state institution. Charges of corruption have spread to areas of Israeli society, such as the army, once considered inviolate.

The breakdown of public morality, in my view, poses the greatest single existential threat to Israel. It is this threat that undermines Israel's ability to cope with other threats; that saps the willingness of Israelis to fight, to govern themselves, and even to continue living within a sovereign Jewish state. It emboldens Israel's enemies and sullies Israel's international reputation. The fact that Israel is a world leader in drug and human trafficking, in money laundering, and in illicit weapons sales is not only unconscionable for a Jewish state, it also substantively reduces that state's ability to survive.

Though seemingly overwhelming, the threats to Israel's existence are not without solutions, either partial or complete.

**P**RESERVING Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state must become a policy priority for Israel. Immense resources must be invested in expanding the industrial and social infrastructure of the city and in encouraging young people to relocate there. Israeli school children must make biannual visits to Jerusalem; materials on Jerusalem's centrality to Jewish history and national identity must be introduced into school curricula.

Similarly, to maintain Israel's demographic integrity, measures must be taken to separate Israel from the densely populated areas of the West Bank. In the absence of effective Palestinian interlocutors, Israel may have to draw its eastern border unilaterally. The new borders should include the maximum number of Jews, of natural and strategic assets, and of Jewish holy places.

There is no absolute solution for terrorism, though terror attacks can be reduced to a manageable level through combined (air, ground, and intelligence) operations, physical obstacles, and advanced anti-ballistic systems. It is also essential that Israel adopt a zero-tolerance policy for terrorism, in which every rocket or mortar shell fired across its border precipitates an immediate and punishing response. There must be no immunity for terrorist leaders, military or political. Israel proved that suicide bombers can be virtually eliminated and that terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah can be deterred.

Israel cannot allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Israel should work in close tandem with the United States, supporting the current administration's diplomatic efforts to dissuade the Iranians from going nuclear but warning American policymakers of the dangers of Iranian prevarication. Israel must also not allow its hands to be tied—it must remain free to initiate other, covert measures to impede Iran's nuclear program, while continuing to develop the plans and intelligence necessary for a military operation.

There is no other option, if the state is to survive, than for Israel to assert its sovereignty fully and equitably over all of its territory and inhabitants. This means forbidding illegal construction in East Jerusalem, the Negev, and the Galilee. Major investments will have to be made to expand the security forces necessary for applying Israeli law uniformly throughout the state. In the specific case of Israeli Arabs, Israel must adopt a two-pronged policy of assuring total equality in the provision of social services and infrastructure while simultaneously insisting that Israeli Arabs demonstrate basic loyalty to the state. A system of national

service—military and non-military—must be established and made obligatory for all Israelis, ending the destructive separation of Haredi youth from the responsibilities of citizenship.

Corruption must be addressed on both the institutional and the ideological levels. The first step in reducing political corruption is the radical reform of the coalition system, in which that corruption is organic. Young people must be encouraged to enter politics and grassroots movements dedicated to probity in public affairs fostered.

Most fundamental, though, corruption must be rooted out through a revival of Zionist and Jewish values. These should be inculcated, first, in the schools, then through the media and popular culture. The most pressing need is for leadership. Indeed, all of these threats can be surmounted with courageous, clear-sighted, and morally sound leaders of the caliber of David Ben-Gurion.

**T**HOUGH remedies exist for all of the monumental threats facing Israel, contemplating them can nevertheless prove dispiriting. A historical context can, however, be helpful. Israel has always grappled with mortal dangers, many more daunting than those of today, and yet managed to prevail. In 1948, a population half of the size of that of Washington, D.C., with no economy and no allies, armed with little more than handguns, held off six Arab armies. It

built an economy, tripled its population in ten years, and developed a vibrant democracy and Hebrew culture.

Nineteen years later, in June 1967, Israel was surrounded by a million Arab soldiers clamoring for its obliteration. Its economy was collapsing and its only ally, France, switched sides. There was no assistance from the United States and only hatred from the Soviet bloc countries, China, and even India.

And look at Israel today: a nation of 7 million with a robust economy, six of the world's leading universities, a pulsating youth culture, cutting-edge arts, and a military that, in its last two engagements, was able to mobilize more than 100 percent of its reserves. According to recent polls, Israelis are the second-most patriotic people in the world, after Americans, and the most willing to defend their country.

Israel in 2009 has treaties with Jordan and Egypt, excellent relations with Eastern Europe, China, and India, and a historic alliance with the United States. By virtually all criteria, Israel in 2009 is in an inestimably better position than at any other time in its 61 years of independence.

Though the severity of the threats jeopardizing Israel's existence must never be underestimated, neither should Israel's resilience and national will. That persistence reflects, at least in part, the success of the Jewish people to surmount similar dangers for well over 3,000 years. Together with Diaspora Jewry and millions of Israel supporters abroad, Israel cannot not only survive these perils but, as in the past, it can thrive. 🏹