Between militarism and moderation in Israel: constructing security in historical perspective

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THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES the concept of security through discursive contestation at the leadership level in a critical Middle Eastern case – that of Israel. The approach adopted here can be called *historical constructivism* in that it traces the fractured construction of security as a phenomenon that changes dramatically, and with significant political implications, over time. This historical constructivist approach is predicated on two fundamental claims. The first is that concepts such as ‘state’, ‘security’ and ‘nation’ are socially constructed and thus will hold different meanings in different spatial and temporal contexts. The second is that the meaning of any socially constructed phenomenon is perpetually contested. That is, one cannot allude to a single ‘objective’ understanding of security at any point in time.

From these basic assumptions the chapter argues that it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between security – a state of protected existence – and the referent object of security – that which is to be protected.¹ Related to this point is the contemporary Israeli notion of national or strategic security versus individual or ‘current’ security.² All states and peoples want to be secure. In the case of Israel, however, the lines between these various and otherwise distinct concepts – security v. referent object; and state v. individual as referent object – have been constructed in an increasingly blurred fashion over time so as to advance the political agendas of specific political groups. In order to explain how and why this is the case, the chapter examines the specific discourses of security employed by opposing political groups during key periods in the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Turning to the Israeli case, it is striking how little the State of Israel in 2001 resembles the nascent state declared during May of 1948. Most of the goals of the first generation of state-builders – territorial consolidation, demographic stability, international recognition, economic prosperity – have been attained, in many instances beyond the wildest imagination of the leaders of the pre-state *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine). In the light of these transformed

realities and of contemporary Israel's preponderance of power, the question of why there is still not a fully stable and institutionalized Palestinian–Israeli peace is all the more intriguing. There are a number of possible approaches one could take to explain the puzzle of the missing Palestinian–Israeli peace. A traditional or systemic international relations approach would examine the effects of the anarchic self-help context of the Middle East and assess the distribution of power capabilities among various regional actors in order to see how and why peace, or a lack thereof, is attained.

This chapter takes a different approach. It suggests that neither the Arab–Israeli conflict generally nor contemporary Palestinian–Israeli relations specifically are well explained by a systemic IR approach. Instead, it argues that the basis of the contemporary conflict rests on a historically significant divergence among the worldviews of Israeli elites regarding the interrelated matters of state development and security. On the one hand, a predominant hard-line doctrine, or what some have termed Israeli 'militarism', has espoused the notion that the Arab–Israeli conflict can be resolved solely through the 'language of force'.³ Elites who support this position have, over time, effectively institutionalized a doctrine of militarism within the Israeli State and society. On the other hand, minority Israeli moderates have long advocated diplomacy and internationalism as vital not only toward resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict but as means towards establishing a prosperous and just state and society.

The following pages argue that failure to resolve the fundamental dispute among Palestinians and Israelis stems directly from the victory during the 1950s of the more hard-line militaristic Israeli approach towards state security and development. In order to demonstrate the cogency of this argument, the first section begins by discussing in more detail the shortcomings of a systemic or structural realist approach to the question of the Palestinian–Israeli peace. The second section of the chapter establishes a historical basis for the dispute between Israeli militarism and moderation with a focus on the critical period of the early to mid-1950s. It is argued that the victory during that period of the Ben-Gurion over the Sharett 'lines' led in the short term to the 1956 Sinai campaign and ultimately to the institutionalization of the use of force as the preferred means of dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict for many decades thereafter. Section three jumps ahead to assess the contemporary implications of the doctrines of militarism and moderation with regard to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict during the 1990s. It is argued that the divergent approaches to security and the Palestinians of Benyamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres during this time represent contemporary instantiations of the ongoing traditions of Israeli militarism and Israeli moderation, respectively. Finally, the conclusion asserts that the lingering dominance of the militaristic approach helps to explain why a fully consolidated and formalized Palestinian–Israeli peace is yet to be.

Why the balance of power does not matter

For better or for worse, the academic international relations literature of the past several decades has been dominated by the influence of structural realism and its variants, all of which emphasize the power of anarchy to influence state behaviour with regard to matters of conflict and peace in world politics. Since the anarchic structure of the international system is constant, the most important variable for understanding international relations is the relative distribution of state power, typically defined in terms of military capabilities.⁴ Given these propositions, the persistence of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict during the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century presents a quandary for structural realism. As tables 3.1 and 3.2 below clearly illustrate, contemporary Israel enjoys a preponderance of power relative to its Arab neighbours in just about every possible way that power can be measured. If distributions of military capabilities and regional position under anarchy were determinative of outcomes, Israel should have been capable of effecting a peace settlement on terms favourable to itself some time ago.

From a strategic perspective, three additional factors further bolster the case for Israeli power. First, Israel has enjoyed several decades of stable and consistent peace with its most serious adversary, Egypt. Second, Israel's – poorly kept secret – nuclear deterrent puts it in a league of its own in the Middle East. Third, the fall of the Soviet Union has effectively arrested much of the ability of Arab armies to equip, train and finance fighting forces that could pose a legitimate

Table 3.1 *Relative indicators of state military power*

	Total military expenditures (\$US, 1998, est.)	Total military personnel (1997)	Combat aircraft (1997)	Tanks (1997)
Egypt	3.28 billion ^a	665,000	510	2,550
Israel	8.7 billion ^b	631,000	780	3,900
Jordan	608.9 million	154,200	91	1,226
Lebanon	500 million	51,400	16	350
Syria	0.8–1 billion ^c	512,500	520	4,800

Notes:

^a 1995–96 fiscal year;

^b 1999 fiscal year;

^c 1997 fiscal year based on official budget data that understate actual spending.

Sources: Central Intelligence Agency 2000; Heller and Shapir 1997.

Table 3.2 *Relative indicators of state developmental power*

	GDP per capita (purchasing power parity, \$US 1999, est.)	Infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 births, 2000, est.)	Life expectancy (2000, est.)	Literacy (% of total population) (1997)
Egypt	3,000	63.33	63.33	51.4 ^a
Israel	18,300	7.9	78.57	95 ^b
Jordan	3,500	21.11	77.36	86.6 ^a
Lebanon	4,500	29.3	71.25	86.5
Syria	2,500	34.86	68.46	70.8

Notes:

^a 1995, estimated;

^b 1992, estimated.

Source: Central Intelligence Agency 2000.

threat to Israel, much less any one else. In light of these realities, Israel is a 'superpower' in terms relative to the power of its Arab neighbours, not only militarily, but economically and developmentally. With such a preponderance of power and so little opposition to balance against it, it is surprising, at least from the structural realist perspective, both that Israel has been unable to impose its will with regard to peace and that the various Arab parties have not yet utterly capitulated to Israeli power. It is precisely for these reasons that an alternative approach to explain the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict is necessary.

The consolidation of Israeli militarism:

David Ben-Gurion v. Moshe Sharett

The Ben-Gurion v. the Sharett 'lines'

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a group of 'new historians' achieved a good deal of success, as well as infamy, for producing a significant corpus of literature critically reinterpreting the origins of the Israeli State and the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁵ More recently, a second wave of 'new' historiography in Israel studies has begun to recast common understandings of Israeli politics during the 1950s. In particular, new emphasis is being placed on the significance of the bitter political clash between two opposing camps within the ruling Mapai Party during the period.⁶ In that struggle, one wing of the party centred on

Israel's first and third prime minister (1948–54 and 1955–63) and leader of the Mapai David Ben-Gurion, while the other supported the second prime minister (1954–55), Moshe Sharett. Crucial to this emergent theme is the view that the struggle was not merely one between individual adversaries but was rather a broader existential/ideational conflict between opposing perspectives on Israeli grand strategy and security and the political–cultural future of the Israeli polity. Sharett's biographer Gabriel Sheffer asserts:

In more than one sense the story [of Moshe Sharett's struggles with David Ben-Gurion] is also a history of the moderate camp in the Yishuv and Israel Labour movement, of the compromise reached between the moderates and the activist hard-liners, and of their respective contributions to the establishment and well-being of the Jewish state. (Sheffer, 1996: 2)

On the one hand, Ben-Gurion and his followers, most notably Pinhas Lavon, defence minister (1954–55), Moshe Dayan, Israel Defence Forces' (IDF) chief of staff (1953–58) and Shimon Peres, director general of the Defence Ministry, advocated a more militant and aggressive orientation, not only for Israel's foreign and military policies but for the structuring of Israeli society in general. This included a hard-line and escalatory approach towards retaliation against Arab incursions, violent or otherwise, into Israeli territory. As Dayan asserted in 1955, the IDF 'had the power to set a [high] price on our blood, [a price] that no Arab village, army, or government would feel was worth paying' (cited in Morris, 1993: 176).

According to the Ben-Gurion line, then, international legitimacy and law were at best merely epiphenomena and at worst serious impediments to the ability of Israel to secure its existence territorially and economically. Foreign relations with the Arab world were most effectively communicated through the 'language of force', whereas diplomacy, it was felt, was perceived by the Arabs to be indicative of Israeli weakness. As the British minister in Amman, A. S. Kirkbride, observed in a communication of June 1950: 'The Jewish authorities . . . always preached the doctrine that the only way to control Arabs was by the utterly ruthless exercise of force' (cited in Morris, 1993: 175, n. 6).

On the other hand, Moshe Sharett and his supporters, including Abba Eban, ambassador to the United States (US) and the United Nations (UN), and, at times, Levi Eshkol, prime minister (1963–69), advocated an aversion to military conflict with the Arab states and the Palestinians and a commitment to diplomacy and negotiation as the means by which to address Israel's foreign and military problems. According to the Sharett line, international legitimacy and diplomatic prestige were long-term means toward the end-point of a secure existence and a just society. The Arabs, in Sharett's view, could understand diplomacy as well as force as a means of resolving fundamental conflicts of interest. Thus, Sharett,

'profoundly appalled by Ben-Gurion's strategic conclusions and recommendations', searched for

political solutions to the Arab–Israeli conflict that would avert the possibility of another war. He felt an overriding need to consider dealing with this danger [of a new war] through non-military means, such as implementing solutions to the refugee problem – a courageous concrete proposal to pay compensation, mending fences with the powers, and continuing efforts to reach an agreement with Egypt. In a nutshell this was the outline of the alternative political orientation that he would try to develop further and implement after his appointment as Israel's second prime minister. (Sheffer, 1996: 690)

Sharett defined the two lines, his own and Ben-Gurion's, and the sharp distinctions between them in similar terms: 'The activists believe that the Arabs understand only the language of force', asserted Sharett in a November 1957 speech. He continued:

The State of Israel must, from time to time, prove clearly that it is strong, and able and willing to use force, in a devastating and highly effective way. If it does not prove this, it will be swallowed up, and perhaps wiped off the face of the earth. As to peace – this approach states – it is in any case doubtful; in any case, very remote . . . If [retaliatory] operations . . . rekindle the fires of hatred, that is no cause for fear for the fires will be fuelled in any event.

But, according to Sharett, the activist approach was not the only alternative. Thus, a more moderate line called for the pursuit of peace under all circumstances. 'This is not only a political calculation in the long run, this is a decisive security consideration . . . We must restrain our responses [to Arab attacks]. And there is always the question: is it really proven that retaliatory actions solve the security problem?' (Quoted in Morris, 1999: 280)

Thus at this early phase of the Arab–Israeli conflict, we find alternative and conflicting notions of how Israel could attain a secure state of existence during the long term. Whereas Ben-Gurion's activist line called for the use of force in order to push through the incontrovertible reality of Israel's permanence and strength, Sharett believed that political accommodation would best preserve the stability of Israeli existence in the long term.

Ben-Gurion v. Sharett, rounds 1–2, and the debate over reprisal policy

The fundamental divide between the two lines in Israeli politics manifested itself across the entire range of policy issues in Israel during the 1950s: the problems of Israeli Palestinians, Palestinian refugees, water concerns, international diplomacy and military spending. But in no sector was the clash between Sharett and

Ben-Gurion more prominent than in the Israeli hard-line reprisal campaign against both violent and non-violent Arab incursions into Israeli territory. Sharett 'had never been enthusiastic about retaliation, doubting its political and military efficacy either as a punishment or deterrence' (Sheffer, 1996: 684). This is evidenced clearly in numerous diary entries in which he sharply criticized a growing Israeli lust for revenge under the guise of security-based reprisal. In response to calls for retaliation against an Arab raid during January 1955, Sharett writes: 'The [Israeli public's and army's] rage must be defused. That alone is the logic, none other [in launching retaliatory strikes]. I do not believe that the reprisal will help in any way in terms of [improving] security. On the contrary . . .'. Two months later, following a major raid into Gaza (later known as 'the Gaza raid'), Sharett laments:

We have taken off the psychological and ethical brakes on this [revenge] instinct [*yetzer*], which is embedded, for ill, in human nature, and have thus permitted and enabled the Paratroop Battalion to turn the matter of revenge into a moral principle . . . [The principle of revenge] has been sanctified in this battalion, which has become the State's collective tool of revenge. (Morris, 1993: 173–4)

Sharett's views were thwarted by an entrenched interest in militarism and the use of force on the part of the Israeli military; an interest that was strongly reinforced by Ben-Gurion's long-standing dual capacity as defence minister in addition to prime minister. Israeli militarism, despite the efforts of Sharett during his stint as prime minister to effect change, had profound policy outcomes, the most notable of which were large-scale reprisal raids against Arab targets, many of which resulted in substantial loss of life. As the frequency and scale of the raids increased, so too did the divide between the two Israeli political camps. The dispute over the logic and propriety of reprisal raids reached a peak with the Qibya operation in October 1953, which resulted in the death of more than seventy Palestinians, including women and children. 'There is no doubt that the Qibya affair profoundly exacerbated relations between Sharett and Ben-Gurion. In turn, these recurrent clashes influenced Ben-Gurion's attitude towards the succession question: these tensions pushed him to an even more determined support of Eshkol' over Sharett to succeed him as prime minister (Sheffer, 1996: 690).

Sharett won out in this first round of political competition, gaining the crucial support within Mapai's inner circle to be appointed prime minister in 1954. No sooner had Sharett assumed office, however, than Ben-Gurion, through his proxies in the government, began to criticize and undermine the prime minister's authority. Sharett fought back, proposing cuts in military spending to the 1954–55 budget, immediately incurring the wrath of Dayan and Lavon (Sheffer, 1996: 714). By 1955, relations between Sharett and

Ben-Gurion further deteriorated and it soon became clear that the Sharett line in Israeli politics was gradually losing support among both the elites and the public. Cognisant of the realities surrounding him, Sharett wrote in his diary in April 1955:

Ben-Gurion was heading towards war and any barrier that would be erected on his way should be removed . . . his belief in reprisals remained strong as ever, and he justified it by saying that the masses of citizens in this country as well as military leaders, like Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon, would not tolerate murderous actions without punishment . . . a strange justification for the doctrine of revenge. (Quoted in Sheffer, 1996: 798)

Ben-Gurion's response was straightforward: 'Contrary to Moshe [Sharett]'s opinion . . . reprisals are imperative. There is no relying for our security on UN observers and foreign states. If we do not put an end to these murders now – the situation will get worse' (quoted in Morris, 1999: 280). Upon his return to the Defence Ministry in February 1955, Ben-Gurion tellingly remarked to an aide that Sharett 'is raising a generation of cowards. Infiltrators are coming in and we are hiding behind fences again. I will not let him. This will be a fighting generation' (quoted in Tal, 1996: 67). By November 1955, the Ben-Gurion line finally won out over Sharett's more moderate worldview, and Ben-Gurion himself replaced Sharett as prime minister.

The foundation and implications of the Ben-Gurion line

That Ben-Gurion ultimately won out in his personal competition with Moshe Sharett is clear, regardless of the historiographical position, new, old, or otherwise, one adopts. What are less clear but perhaps more interesting are some of the broader underlying reasons for and the implications of the victory of the Ben-Gurion line. Uri Ben-Eliezer argues in a recent study that the course of the Arab–Israeli conflict can be understood in large measure as an outcome of entrenched and institutionalized militarism within Israeli society and culture. 'During the two decades beginning in 1936', Ben-Eliezer asserts, 'the idea of a military solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict was gradually legitimated first within the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, then within the new state and crystallized into a value, a formula, and a doctrine' (Ben-Eliezer, 1998: x). Israeli militarism is most vividly seen in the growth and prominence of the Ben-Gurion line during the 1950s. Accordingly, an

institutional trade-off was undertaken between central forces in society, by which the inculcation of the idea that it is possible and desirable to solve 'the Arab problem' by military means was counterbalanced by the clarification and concomitant order of relations of authority . . . the military solution was universally accepted as the legitimate and desirable way to end the Israeli-Arab conflict. *It became part of the*

natural order and was preferred over possible political solutions involving diplomacy and compromise. (Ben-Eliezer, 1998: 13–14; emphasis added)

According to this interpretation, then, Israeli security policy decisions, such as large-scale reprisal raids and the Sinai campaign itself, are better viewed as choices that were to an extent pre-determined by cultural and institutional norms and ideologies than as strategic calculations based on rational assessments of systemic variables. This perspective is supported by the findings of Yagil Levy, who recently has suggested that Israeli militarism can be explained by the relationship between super-ordinate and subordinate groups within Israeli society. To elaborate: the selection of military solutions to the Arab–Israeli conflict over available alternatives, coupled with the promotion of military prominence within Israeli society, served the ability of the Ashkenazi elite to solidify and enhance their dominant role within society.⁷ Thus, the Arab–Israeli conflict provided a basis for the Ashkenazim to attain a ‘legitimation of inequality owing to the war-driven internal empowerment of the state’ (Levy, 1997: 23). Increased militarization and bellicosity were important in asserting Ashkenazi dominance over other ethnic groups and, in particular, over the Sephardim, from Arab and North African countries, in the hierarchy of the military. The more daring the operations, the more admiration and prestige were given the military by the Ashkenazi political leadership, especially Dayan and Ben-Gurion. The more admiration and prestige were given from the top down, the more the elite units of the military responsible for implementing the most bellicose operations became magnets for Ashkenazi youth. Thus, ‘the military had taken part in aggravating the external threat and concomitantly acquired prestige by repulsing this very threat. Self-creation of symbolic resource was at work’ (Levy, 1997: 85–6).

Satisfied with the newly created war-based reality, social groups’ openness to receiving force-oriented signals transmitted by the military command was greater than their openness to hearing moderate calls voiced even half-heartedly in Arab countries . . . Satisfaction, by nature, dictates low demand for information. A public discourse that allowed for two or more alternative avenues to deal with the regional threat . . . was averted. Nor was the Ben-Gurion–Sharett debate voiced publicly. (Levy, 1997: 91)

Key to the logic of this argument is that strategic decisions were not taken in response to systemic stimuli *per se*. On the contrary,

agents did not rationally calculate several alternatives in terms of losses and gains; at least in the long term they possibly could have partly satisfied their interests even had the state selected a more pacifist policy. Rather, agents reconciled their interests to the newly created reality that satisfied them *relative* to a past reality, not necessarily to a tentative one. (Levy, 1997: 92)

In other words, militarism empowered already dominant groups in society, inspiring them to press for further militarism regardless of future losses in terms of war with the Arabs. 'The immediate results were pronounced in the Sinai Campaign. It was managed as an "elite war". Conceived and planned in complete secrecy by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and a few advisors, it was not brought to the cabinet for approval until almost the eleventh hour' (Levy, 1997: 93).

These interpretations are not unsupported by the 'empirical data' on the events leading up to the 1956 War. As early as October–November 1953, toward the end of his first stint as prime minister, Ben-Gurion revealed plans for reorganizing the IDF

based on the assumption that the 'second round' would occur in 1956 when, according to his evaluation, the Arab armies would be ready to launch a new war against Israel. This assessment dictated Ben-Gurion's future political and military actions and moves and would contribute to the decision to launch a 'war of Choice' in 1956. (Sheffer, 1996: 690)

Similarly, Motti Golani, who has been the first to review the most recently released archival material in London and Israel on the Sinai campaign, argues: 'my research led me to conclude that Israel had been 'in search of a war' before the onset of the Suez Crisis and without any connection to it' (Golani, 1998: viii). Thus, during 1954–55, Israel's retaliation policies underwent a subtle but crucial shift away from punishment and deterrence towards provocation and escalation in the effort to explore the possibility of a 'war of choice'. Despite being justified for their deterrent value, '[p]aradoxically, during the years 1955–56 (and perhaps as early as 1954), retaliatory strikes were also launched by the IDF in order to draw the Arab states into a premature war' (Morris, 1999: 276). 'Dayan wanted war, and, periodically, he hoped that a given retaliatory strike would embarrass or provoke the Arab state attacked into itself retaliating, giving Israel cause to escalate the shooting until war resulted' (Morris, 1993: 178–179).

A turning point in the tenor of the Israeli retaliation policy was clearly symbolized by the massive Gaza raid of 28 February–1 March 1955, codenamed 'Operation Black Arrow', which caused the death of thirty-eight Egyptians and Palestinians and brought injury to several dozen more.

Far from curbing infiltrator attacks, the Gaza Raid proved a great catalyst of Israeli–Egyptian violence. Before February 28, 1955, attacks across the Gaza frontier into Israel had been local and sporadic, not state policy; thereafter, they were promoted and directed by Cairo . . . The Gaza Raid proved to be a turning point in Israeli–Egyptian relations and in the history of the Middle East . . . Gaza had not only led

to Egyptian counter-raiding. It had also set in motion a massive arms race, bound to end in war. (Morris, 1993: 334)

Not surprisingly, then, both 'Sharett and Dayan showed far greater concern over possible escalation due to border incidents, the former viewing it as a danger, the latter as a prospect' (Golani, 1998: 8). Even one Israeli historian who disagrees with the overall revisionist interpretation of 1956 acknowledges: 'It was Israeli reaction that overlaid the infiltrations with a political dimension, as Israel did not treat them for what they were but linked them to the broad Arab-Israeli context and to the country's political and security problems' (Tal, 1996: 61).

It is important to point out that the preceding view of Israel's reprisal policy as other than a purely strategic effort to attain deterrence is not merely an interpretive move on the part of modern scholars. At a meeting of Israeli intelligence executives during February 1953, Yair Elgom, head of the Jordan desk in the Foreign Ministry asserted that 'most of Jordan's violations [of the armistice agreement] . . . were a reaction to our own violations. Jordan's secondary violations do not justify our sharp reprisals . . . justice . . . was not on our side. This in itself may not be important, but it is so obvious that it will be difficult to hide it for long from the West . . . It is time that we reviewed our actions' (quoted in Morris, 1993: 216–17). Similarly, the IDF Intelligence Department in early 1953 reported: 'During the past few months all our reprisal raids have ended in failure, lowering Israel's prestige in Arab eyes and causing other damage . . . The existing retaliatory strikes against border villages must cease, as it does more harm than good' (quoted in Morris, 1993: 217).

There are two conclusions to be drawn from the preceding discussion. The first is that by the time of the 1956 Sinai campaign, the hard-line Israeli approach toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, instantiated in the Ben-Gurion line, had ultimately won out in the competition with Israeli moderates. That victory, in turn, represented a crucial consolidation of power for the Ashkenazi elite, who benefited tremendously from the political rewards gained by successfully implementing aggressive military policies *vis-à-vis* the Arabs. Second, and more important, the events of the 1950s, culminating in the 1956 War, were a victory as much for the Ben-Gurion line as they were on the battlefield. As a result of these twin victories, one military and the other political, a doctrine of militarism was institutionalized within the Israeli State and society with profound implications for the future trajectory of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The victories ensured that security would be to the fore in all future debates regarding Israel's relations with the Arabs, whether in the context of war or peace. Additionally, the 'language of force' would henceforth be the preferred option in resolving the conflict over other available alternatives.

From militarism to territorial security

The Netanyahu v. the Peres line

Israel's strategic situation has changed somewhat dramatically since the 1950s. No longer does Israel face an imminent threat from its most deadly Arab adversary; nor must Israeli military planners be concerned with the prospect of facing first-rank Soviet-trained and supplied Arab fighting forces. Perhaps of greatest consequence, especially at the perceptual level, is the attainment of a nuclear deterrent unmatched by the Arab states. It is interesting, then, that the 'language of force' remains prevalent in the thinking and discourse of Israeli political and military leaders, even through the present juncture. In acknowledgement of the changed realities of Israel's strategic position, the 'language of force' is no longer so much a matter of the 'next round' in terms of conventional inter-state warfare, although even that discourse persists in some quarters of the Israeli polity.⁸

For the most part, however, contemporary Israeli militarism is manifest in the doctrine of *territorial security* espoused by the Likud Party and a number of right-wing parties and organizations allied with it.⁹ The doctrine of territorial security, much like the Ben-Gurion line of the 1950s, holds that the most effective means by which to deal with the Palestinians are through the language, if not the outright use, of force. Accordingly, Israel treats the Palestinians as a security threat rather than as political partners, and all issues pertaining to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict – especially territorial issues – are addressed through the discourse of security rather than in terms of political partnership and diplomacy. Instead of acknowledging the preponderance of Israeli power as a basic starting-point from which to approach the Palestinians, the Likud and its allies have retained the discourse and strategy of militarism toward the Palestinian 'problem'. In the process, security and strategy replace politics as the dominant issues within the thought and language of Likud politicians and their supporters. By linking the issue of land with that of security, the Israeli right wing has essentially prolonged the Palestinian–Israeli conflict beyond what would have otherwise been its 'natural' life.

In contrast to the doctrine of territorial security espoused by the Likud, the left wing of the Labour Party and its allies inherited the legacy of Israeli moderation originally and most eloquently espoused by Moshe Sharett.¹⁰ Thus, the leading proponents of the doctrine of moderation discuss the importance of diplomacy, negotiation and, most centrally, partnership.¹¹ The moderate line thus argues that security is better attained by creating new political realities than by identifying and responding to perceived threats. In accordance with these views, the Palestinian problem is seen as one of politics and not of security, *per se*. At the core of this doctrine is the notion of 'land for peace', whereby long-term security is linked not to control of land but rather to the exchange of

land for a stable and institutionalized peace. The following subsections discuss the most important proponents of the two opposing doctrines during the 1990s, namely, Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres.

Benjamin Netanyahu and territorial security

The most eloquent and influential proponent of territorial security during the 1990s was Benjamin Netanyahu, who served as prime minister from 1996 to 1999. During the years both prior to as well as following his electoral victory in May 1996, Netanyahu carefully and cogently constructed and advocated the militaristic doctrine of territorial security, which emphasizes several key themes. The most important is the underlying assumption that the Palestinian question and, indeed, the Palestinians themselves are a security problem, or threat, rather than political partners. Accordingly, matters of Palestinian–Israeli relations are addressed as responses to threats rather than as political negotiations to be resolved through co-operation and partnership. The foremost instantiation of this approach is in an effort to inextricably link territorial control with the concept of security. That this view may lead to confrontation as opposed to reconciliation Netanyahu readily admits: ‘continuing struggle does not necessarily mean perpetual war, but it does mean an ongoing national exertion and the possibility of periodic bouts of international confrontation’ (Netanyahu, 2000: 372).

Netanyahu worked assiduously to construct a discursive field whereby land is equated with security, so that, by definition, to give up one entails a diminishment of the other. According to this logic, diplomacy is ‘idealism’ and true security can be attained only through territorial control. ‘Most of the wars’, writes Netanyahu,

including the wars between Kuwait and Iraq, the invasion of Kuwait, were based on conditions of peace. There were peace treaties galore, all over the place. Most wars in the world start from a state of peace treaties and normalisation. Now, I think that ultimately guarantees are important, but they cannot substitute for actual security. I, for one, would like to see American guarantees . . . But one thing I do not want: I don’t want American boys coming in to defend Israel. And that’s what you’ll end up doing if Israel is denuded, if Israel strips away these buffer strips, the wall of the Golan Heights, the wall of the West Bank that protects Israel.¹²

For Netanyahu, ‘land-for-peace’ is a strategic rather than a political problem. ‘Given the specifics of the West Bank’, Netanyahu contends, ‘the slogan ‘land for peace’ is singularly inappropriate: To achieve a sustainable peace, Israel must maintain a credible deterrent long enough to effect a lasting change in Arab attitudes. It is precisely Israel’s control of this strategic territory that has deterred all-out war and has made eventual peace more likely’ (Netanyahu, 2000: 319). The doctrine of territorial security thus views Israeli power as

providing a pretext for continued territorial control rather than as facilitating a process of compromise from the standpoint of strength. Accordingly, Netanyahu contends, 'a territorial peace is hampered by the continuing concern that once territories are handed over to the Arab side, they will be used for future assaults to destroy the Jewish state . . . Ironically, the ceding of strategic territory to the Arabs might trigger this destructive process by convincing the Arab world that Israel *has* become vulnerable enough to attack' (Netanyahu, 2000: 322). Thus, Netanyahu suggests that accumulation and consolidation of land are in point of fact necessary requirements of security, generally speaking. That said, Netanyahu somewhat ironically claims that 'Israel does not ask for additional territory, only that the present strategic depth (and strategic height) of the West Bank be left intact' (Netanyahu, 2000: 303–4).

In all public forums where the issue of land is raised, Netanyahu invariably draws upon the linkage between territorial control and Israeli security. Guiding a plane tour of Israeli politicians and members of the media during 1994, he pointed out: 'The last house in [the Israeli settlement] Kfar Sava is just 200 meters from [the Palestinian town of] Qalqiliya. The government of Yitzhak Rabin is going to establish a Palestinian state there. They don't admit it in public, but MKs are talking about it in the corridors.' This, according to Netanyahu, would pose a grave danger to Israel, prompting him to lament about 'what this would mean for [Israeli] security'.¹³ In response to the Hebron massacre of twenty-nine Palestinians by the settler Baruch Goldstein that same year, Netanyahu remarked that 'Jews are slain on the roads every day and none of these cases was ever inquired into. We need an inquiry into the overall deterioration of security in this country since the government made its deal with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). It would be wrong to isolate a single atypical event like an artificial island in time and space.'¹⁴ Following a shooting of IDF soldiers by Palestinian policemen at the Erez checkpoint in Gaza, also during 1994, Netanyahu asserted that 'the important lesson to learn from the PLO's failure in keeping the agreement and the security in Gaza is that Israel must keep exclusive responsibility for security and order in Judea and Samaria in the hands of the IDF'.¹⁵ Both of these statements reflect a consistent militaristic worldview according to which two assumptions follow: (1) the Palestinians represent a fundamental threat; (2) accordingly, control of Palestinian land is essential toward maintaining Israeli security.

Following his election victory in 1996, Netanyahu institutionalized the doctrine of territorial security in the guidelines for the governing coalition between the Likud and its allies.¹⁶ The guidelines' text states: 'Settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel is an expression of our right to the land and it represents an inseparable part of our national security. The government will ensure the continued existence and development of new settlements and will allot the

required funds for that purpose.’¹⁷ In less than a year, however, Netanyahu came under increasing pressure from both the United States and within Israel to tone down these positions, especially following a deadly confrontation between Palestinian police and the IDF following the opening of an archeological tunnel in the Old City in September 1996. Netanyahu, however, persisted in steadfastly resisting such pressure. As peace talks with the Palestinians repeatedly stalled, it became clear that Netanyahu’s basic approach toward the peace process, as called for by the doctrine of territorial security, was one of confrontation and threat rather than one based on political partnership and compromise. After rejecting an American-sponsored peace proposal in March 1998, Netanyahu declared on national television: ‘Understand that Israel is a tiny country, and every piece of territory here is tied to security, every piece. Every per cent is the size of Tel Aviv. And this territory that abuts our major cities determines whether we can effectively guarantee that additional territory is not turned into a Hamas base, a terrorist base.’¹⁸ ‘You can very quickly reach a situation in which you endanger the security of the state, and I will not (do it).’¹⁹ By the end of 1998, Netanyahu’s failure to produce any results on the peace front, coupled with a series of domestic political scandals, grated on the Israeli public and in May 1999 he was defeated in national elections by the Labour Party leader Ehud Barak.

Shimon Peres and the politics of partnership

From within the older generation of Israeli leaders who can be described as ‘moderate’, few make a less likely candidate than Shimon Peres. Having been a ‘Ben-Gurionist’ for most of his career, Peres’s transformation from a hard-liner to an internationalist caught many Israelis, even some close to Peres, by surprise. ‘Many of my friends’, Peres himself admits,

and even more of my opponents, have asked me how my concern for the armed defense of Israel . . . has been supplanted by fervent dedication to the peace process . . . As far as I can tell, it was not I who shifted course from the traditional concept of national defense, which depends mainly on military and weapons systems, to the modern concept, which is of necessity based on political accords, and embraces international security and economic considerations. Rather, the world has changed. And the process of change compels us to replace our outdated concepts with an approach tailored to the new reality. (Peres, 1993: 33–4)

Whereas Netanyahu, as discussed above, views the Palestinian question as a matter of security and threat, Peres emphasizes the political nature of the Palestinian–Israeli relationship and the importance of partnership and co-operation to that relationship. ‘There are two ways in which to end the conflict

with the PLO', Peres remarked during a meeting with US Secretary of State Warren Christopher: 'With the power of power or with the power of wisdom. Wisdom is better than power. If we all act wisely, the PLO will become a partner in peace instead of an obstacle to it' (Peres, 1993: 29–30). Elaborating on the theme of the Palestinians as partners, Peres notes that he and former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin 'tried to look upon Arafat as a partner. Netanyahu looks upon him as an agent. Arafat cannot exist as an agent. You cannot give him orders . . . We can meet as partners for peace, but we cannot make out of him an instrument to realize our policies' (Peres and Littell, 1998: 95–6). 'In order to make peace', Peres writes,

you must have a partner more than a plan. If you have a plan and you don't have a partner, you have a piece of paper that's of no value. Only when you have a partner can you try and find the proper plan . . . Now enemies are the raw material of partners. Dangers are the raw material of hope. How to overcome them? How to take an enemy and make a friend of him? How to take a danger and turn it into an opportunity? . . . when you finally meet the other person, you are surprised to learn that he is a human being like yourself. (Peres and Littell, 1998: 74)

On the sharp contrast between his worldview and that of Netanyahu, Peres makes a number of important points. First, whereas Peres campaigned in 1996 on the platform of 'land for peace', the Likud claimed 'that you can have peace for nothing. Which is nonsense. Saying that you can have security before peace. Which again is nonsense' (Peres and Littell, 1998: 89). 'Mr. Netanyahu made a terrible mistake when he said he would provide security before peace. For peace you need a majority. For terrorism a tiny group of people can do whatever they want . . . when you say, I will not make peace unless all the bombs disappear, you encourage the terrorists to continue' (Peres and Littell, 1998: 96–7). Second, Netanyahu, according to Peres, is incapable of properly comprehending the Palestinian perspective on the Arab–Israeli conflict, which is, in turn, essential towards resolving it. Netanyahu 'sees himself as a great authority on terrorism. On many occasions he looks at the Arab side through the eyes of an expert on terrorism. His book is devoted to the issue of terrorism. I am not sure that he understands [the Arab side]' (Peres and Littell, 1998: 22). Accordingly, whereas Netanyahu believes Israeli power is a means toward the end of dictating the resolution of security problems, Peres adopts almost precisely the opposite view: 'To achieve peace, the basic problems of the Middle East need to be approached realistically. First and foremost, we must all acknowledge the futility of war: the Arabs cannot defeat Israel on the battlefield; Israel cannot dictate the conditions of peace to the Arabs' (Peres, 1993: 49). Peace, then, can be brought about only by political rather than military means.

Peres's vision of the Middle East, much like that of Moshe Sharett during the 1950s, is formed of a cosmopolitan outlook according to which security

issues are a function of diplomacy and co-operation rather than problems that are best resolved through the 'language of force'. Accordingly, Peres argues that the Palestinian question is really a subset – albeit a crucial one – of the broader matter of overall Middle East peace. To attain peace on a regional level requires

bilateral and multilateral pacts, extending beyond the borders of the countries involved and covering whole regions . . . the key to maintaining an equable and safe regional system is in politics and economics . . . True power – even military power – is no longer anchored in the boot camp, but on the university campuses. Politics should pave the way from pure military strategy to an enriched political and economic repertoire. (Peres, 1993: 34–35)

Thus, Peres adopts a moderate and cosmopolitan, rather than a hard-line militaristic, worldview with regard to the international relations of the Middle East generally, and the Palestinian–Israeli peace process specifically.

Israeli politics during the 1990s reveal a very clear picture of the contrast between the militaristic and moderate worldviews with regard to resolving the Palestinian question. For the latter part of 1993, while Netanyahu established himself as leader of the Likud, Peres oversaw and later participated in the secret Oslo negotiations, which culminated in the now-famous Oslo Accords, signed at the White House on 13 September 1993.²⁰ Peres attained his greatest success in promoting and implementing his moderate doctrine while serving as foreign minister under Yitzhak Rabin from 1992 to 1995, during which time he successfully shepherded the Oslo negotiations to fruition and convinced Rabin of the need to agree to them. Following Rabin's tragic assassination in 1995, Peres assumed the prime ministers' office and was soon plagued with political difficulties, the most damaging of which was a series of deadly suicide bombings by the Hamas group. In the wake of the bombings, Peres was defeated at the ballot box by Netanyahu in 1996 and was subsequently replaced as Labour Party leader by Ehud Barak.

Conclusion

Theirs 'was a struggle between hard-liners and soft-liners, security-centredness and diplomacy, intractability and conciliation, and the certainty of war and a chance for peace' (Morris, 1993: 227). While this statement by the founding new historian Benny Morris alludes to the historical competition between David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett discussed earlier, it is remarkable how aptly the words also apply to the divergent doctrines of Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu during the 1990s. As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, the ongoing insolubility of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is not well explained by systemic international relations theory for the simple reason that the balance of power in the Middle East has changed dramatically, while the dispute between Palestinians and Israelis and among Israelis themselves is in large measure

unchanged. The preceding sections have therefore traced two competing strands of thought regarding state development and strategy in Israel: a dominant line of militarism and security, and a minority line of moderation and diplomacy. While the militaristic doctrine has been in the ascendant since the victory of the Ben-Gurion over the Sharett lines during the 1950s, the competition between the two perspectives is still very much apparent today. This raises two very interesting and significant issues worthy of discussion. The first pertains to the matter of security as a concept. The second regards the present and the future of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process.

The preceding historiographical accounts of the Arab–Israeli conflict reveal the important conclusion that security is in practice a constructed phenomenon in so far as it carries different meanings in different historical and cultural contexts. This has at least three important implications. First, it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between security – a state of protected existence – and the referent object of security – that which is to be protected (see Campbell, 1998: 2–3; and Buzan, 1990: 22–8). All states and people want to be secure. However, as Ben-Gurion and his followers recognized, there is an innate distinction between national or strategic security v. personal or ‘current’ security’ (see Alpher, 1995, Academic Index Internet version). Whereas the Ben-Gurionists were concerned with both forms of security, their primary consideration was national/strategic, not personal/current.

For the present, Benyamin Netanyahu, Ariel Sharon and the Likud have maintained the prominence of security as a fundamental national issue, but the referent object of security has changed quite profoundly as the nature of the threats to Israel and Israelis have been transformed. At the start of the twenty-first century, Israelis have much more to fear from individual suicide bombers than from airborne jet bombers. Second, and relatedly, Netanyahu and Sharon and their allies, most notably the National Religious Party and the *Gush Emunim*, have intentionally blurred this important distinction between national and current security in order to play on the fears of the Israeli public and further their goal of maintaining territorial control over Palestinian lands. Thus, the doctrine of territorial security is in an important sense a façade employed to justify the irredentist claims of the settlers rather than a genuine effort to further the requirements of security in either of its forms. Third, and most importantly, by promoting the doctrine of territorial security, the Likud and the settlers have antagonized the Palestinians by continuing to approach them as security problems rather than as legitimate, if flawed, negotiating partners. In doing so, the Likud has essentially undermined the entire basis for a stable and institutionalized settlement. In short, territorial security and ‘land for peace’ are fundamentally incompatible.

Turning to the present and the future of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process, it is not insignificant that Israel has seen two new prime ministers since

the departure of Netanyahu in May 1999.²¹ One might ask, why focus on Netanyahu and Peres at all in light of the waning of their respective careers? The response is simple: while neither Netanyahu nor Peres is currently in power, their articulations of the doctrines of militarism and moderation, respectively, remain as robust as ever. It is also far from clear that moderation has replaced militarism as the dominant doctrine in Israeli politics, especially with the previously unthinkable election of the quintessential hawk Ariel Sharon to the office of prime minister. Indeed, it seems that the notion of territorial security and the fear of the Palestinian 'threat' are still quite prominent among many, if not most, Israelis (see Benvenisti, 2000: A31; Livnat, 2000: A21; Sharansky, 2000: A25). As Netanyahu himself most recently and clearly put it, 'the vast majority of Israelis have once again realized that our enduring conflict with the Palestinians is rooted in a dispute not over the borders of the Jewish state but over its very existence' (Netanyahu, 2001: A19). Furthermore, the *Gush Emunim* has not disappeared, thus guaranteeing that the linkage between territorial control and security will not diminish appreciably any time soon. While many point to the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa intifada* in the fall of 2000 as a major impediment to peace, this chapter would caution against thinking with too short a time horizon and thus conflating precipitating with underlying factors pertaining to the peace process. Rather, the analysis here suggests that a formal and institutionalized peace will remain elusive until the majority of Israelis come to support moderation over militarism in their basic perception of the politics of Israel–Palestine.

NOTES

- 1 For discussion of referent objects of security, see Buzan, 1990: 22–8, especially. For a related discussion of risk and referents marked as dangers, see Campbell, 1998: 2–3.
- 2 Yossi Alpher (1995, Academic Index internet version) discusses these two conceptions as they relate to the peace process.
- 3 The term 'doctrine' is employed in a very traditional sense. For the present purposes, a doctrine is defined as a set of principles that is taught and learned by a group or groups that claim, explicitly or implicitly, to adhere to that doctrine. On Israeli militarism, see Ben-Eliezer, 1998.
- 4 All of the core propositions of structural realism are laid out most elegantly by Waltz in his classic *Theory of International Politics* (1979). For examples of structural realist approaches to modern Middle East politics, see Telhami, 1990; Walt, 1987.
- 5 For overviews of the 'new historiography' in Israeli Studies, see Lustick, 1997b: 157–62. See also Levy, 1999; Slater, 1994; Heydemann, 1991; and contributions to the special issue *History and Memory* (1995). The first and most well known texts on the new historiography are Morris, 1987 and Shlaim, 1988.
- 6 The Mapai is the precursor party to the modern Labour and contemporary One-Israel Parties.
- 7 The founding Ashkenazim, or Jews of European ancestry, historically have dominated Israeli society and politics. Sephardim, or Jews of Arab and North African origin, have traditionally been members of the lower classes, both socially and politically speaking.

- 8 One settler leader in Gaza recently put the matter of the 'next round' as follows: 'Egypt still considers a war option viable and that it can dispatch its army across Sinai in a single day while Israel scrambles to summon its reserves. The only guarantee that the Israeli army will remain at strategic points in Gaza . . . is on the pretext of guarding settlements. The army isn't protecting us, say settlers, as much as we're ensuring its presence in Gaza' (*Jerusalem Report*, 26 October 1998, 15).
- 9 The Likud is the second-largest and most important right-wing party in Israel. While it is traditionally allied with the settler movement, the latter maintains its own grassroots organization and party, the *Gush Emunim* (Bloc of the Faithful) and the National Religious Party (NRP), respectively.
- 10 The left wing of the Labour Party refers to the faction led by Shimon Peres, Yossi Beilin and Haim Ramon. The Labour left wing's principal ally is the leftist Meretz Party.
- 11 For further discussion of the conception of partnership in the Palestinian–Israeli peace process, see Lustick, 1997a: 741–57.
- 12 *Larry King Live*, 7 December 1992, Transcript no. 713.
- 13 'Likud Fights PLO Pact with Scattershot', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 January 1994, A4, col. 1; brackets added.
- 14 *Jerusalem Post* 1994a, 2.
- 15 *Jerusalem Post* 1994b, 2. Judea and Samaria are the names employed by Israeli settlers and many right-wing Israelis to refer to the West Bank. The names are derived from the Old Testament.
- 16 See note 9, above.
- 17 *Mideast Mirror* 1997. The *Mirror* gives the statement from the newspaper *Ma'ariv*.
- 18 *International Herald Tribune*, 1998, 2.
- 19 *Associated Press* 1998.
- 20 For a chronological account of the Oslo negotiations, see *New York Times* (1993: section I, 1); Savir, 1998; and Elon, 1993.
- 21 They are, respectively, Ehud Barak and, as of the time of this writing, Ariel Sharon.

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