



PERSPECTIVES

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Not an “Existential Threat” — A Vital National Interest

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hachon

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The notion of an “existential threat” to Israel largely belongs to the last century, and its use is no longer helpful in assessing Israel’s security situation. Instead of gauging the security challenges now facing Israel on the basis of this archaic notion, Lieut. Gen. (res.) Gadi Eizenkot would do well to focus on threats to Israel’s vital national interests.

In a *Yediot Ahronot* article on December 31, 2020, Lieut. Gen. (res.) Gadi Eizenkot set forth his political-security outlook. His assessment of the security challenges now facing Israel amounts to the statement: “The challenges are difficult but do not constitute an existential threat.”

Since the War of Independence, the notion of an “existential threat” has played a central role in sizing up Israel’s security situation, but by the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur War it had already become problematic. In that war, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat brought about a strategic shift. He planned the war for a limited purpose only: not to threaten Israel’s existence but to deal a harsh blow to its status and security concept.

Sadat’s military and political achievements had a key impact in terms of shaping the dangers to Israel that have emerged since then. As they receded from the level of blatant existential threats, they fractured the consensus that had prevailed in Israeli society until 1967 on the basic question of what constitutes sufficient reason to go to war.

The situation is similar to that in other parts of the world. In the recent war in Nagorno-Karabach, for example, Azerbaijan won and Armenia was

defeated—but the war never entailed an existential threat to Armenia, which in fact continues to exist and even to hold a significant part of Nagorno-Karabach. Israel, of course, cannot permit such a defeat, even it does not entail an existential threat.

The notion of an “existential threat” largely belongs to the last century, and its use is not helpful in assessing Israel’s security situation. Indeed, the IDF’s basic doctrine includes a statement that takes account of the different possibilities: “The national-security field deals with any threat to national survival and to vital national interests.” And it is here that the discussion of the Eizenkot doctrine begins: with a focus on vital national interests.

Concerning the Palestinian arena, Eizenkot asserted the need to “strive for a separation from the Palestinians.” Though many former senior officials of the defense establishment agree with that view, it, too, is stuck in the 20th century. Separation from the Palestinians was carried out under the leadership of PM Yitzhak Rabin. With the establishment of the Palestinian Authority headed by Arafat in the summer of 1994, Rabin effected a separation from the entire Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip. The separation from 90% of the Palestinian population of the West Bank—that is, from all of Areas A and B—had been completed in accordance with Rabin’s plans by January 1996. Palestinians remained under Israeli control only in East Jerusalem and in Area C.

What the continued striving for separation actually means is dividing Jerusalem according to the Clinton-Barak parameters and withdrawing from vital parts of Area C. In that regard, the Eizenkot doctrine deviates from the positions Rabin emphatically asserted in his last speech to the Knesset on October 5, 1995.

The practical implication of “striving for separation” is the uprooting of more than 150,000 Israelis. This is a direct result of keeping only “main areas of settlement” in Israeli hands. The notion of “arrangements” focuses on “settlement blocs” that take up no more than 3% of the West Bank.

In speaking of a separation, Eizenkot calls for “firm security arrangements,” and therein lies a fundamental disagreement about the security implications of the West Bank’s Jewish neighborhoods. As starkly illustrated by the Gaza experience, security and/or demilitarization arrangements are meaningless unless backed by a substantial Israeli presence on the ground.

Eizenkot began his article by stating: “Israel needs leadership that will lead the country in advancing its national values, in fulfilling the national vision.”

I couldn't agree more. It is here that the discussion needs to begin, as apparently we do not espouse the same national vision.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.