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Israel's Multifaceted Power

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

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The following is the final Perspective Paper submitted to the BESA Center by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld before his passing on February 25, 2021. May his memory be blessed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: It is far more difficult to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Israel than it is to do the same for a Western European country. Israel has a great deal of hard and soft power, but it also seriously underperforms in terms of diplomatic power and the combating of anti-Israel propaganda.

Israel is an unusually difficult and confusing country to assess in terms of strengths and weaknesses. This becomes clear when one compares it to a Western European country with a more or less similar size population, such as Belgium. The latter is a member of the NATO military alliance: its military power is integrated within NATO and the country's strength in this area depends on it. Belgium's political power derives largely from its membership in the EU. To a great extent the same is true of its soft power.

No similar concise analysis is possible for Israel. The country's military power rarely expresses itself in full-fledged wars. Its armed conflicts with Palestinian and Arab terror organizations in Lebanon and Gaza are best described as campaigns. Israel undertakes military actions in Syria from time to time, partly aimed against Iranian forces stationed there. It reacts to rocket and other fire from Gaza as well. Only a small part of Israel's military capability is used in the latter conflict.

Israel is, however, repeatedly threatened with genocide and extermination by the Iranian government. This is a big-league menace. Israel has to be fully prepared to prevent such an effort if it were to be attempted.

Cyber technology, used for both offense and defense, is a new form of what one might call semi-military power. The 2009-2010 Stuxnet computer worm attack on several of Iran's atomic sites is an example. This action is believed by many to have been conducted by the US and Israel. Another cyber strike that experts believe was conducted by Israel was the attack on Iran that brought the Shahid Rajaee port terminal to an abrupt and inexplicable halt on May 9, 2020.

Another aspect of power that contains a military aspect is domestic security. In Israel's battle with Palestinian terrorists, this plays an important role. Experts from many countries come to Israel to learn about security and the Israeli government publishes information about its wide range of domestic security training, yet this is rarely discussed in the international mainstream media.

In the realm of cyber security, Israeli technology providers offer telecommunication and network security, financial processing, data security, and cutting-edge biometric identification systems such as e-passports, which are now being issued by several European and Asian countries.

Israel's political power situation is complex as well. It may or may not have radically changed for the worse on January 20, 2020, when the Biden administration replaced the pro-Israeli Trump government in the US.

Israel's recent peace agreements with four Arab states should not be considered primarily American achievements, though the US played a huge role in them. They reflect the standing of Israel's political power in part of the Arab world. In normalizing relations with Israel, these states broke their supposedly unlimited support for the Palestinians.

In the late 1980s, Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye coined the expression "soft power." He described it as "the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers… Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment." Israel's peace agreements with the four Arab countries can be considered "preferred outcomes by attraction."

The notion of soft power as a general term is not very useful in understanding Israel's particular situation. The concept has to be broken down into components. For instance, does the massive early purchase of anti-COVID vaccines by Israel tell us much about its "economic power"? Richer countries with a somewhat similar population, such as Switzerland, could have paid more but did not. Does that mean Israel has more economic power than Switzerland? Probably not.

Part of Israel's soft power in the economic field derives from its high tech research activities. We might describe this as a sub-category called "research power." Considering the size of its population, Israel's high tech performance is remarkable. There are approximately 75 Israeli-owned companies listed on the NASDAQ, the second-largest number of foreign firms to appear on the US exchange (after Canada). Between 2010 and 2019, the total exit value of Israeli high tech companies was about $111 billion. Many leading foreign corporations want to harness Israel's brainpower and partner with its high tech companies.

Israel is also an attractive research partner for other nations. One sign of this was its participation in Horizon 2020, which was the biggest EU research and innovation program in history. The program put nearly €80 billion over a period of seven years (2014 to 2020) toward securing Europe's global competitiveness.

There is also a phenomenon regarding Israel that can best be described as mythical power. This power is not promoted by the state itself but exists in the minds of some people abroad. Israeli diplomats have told me that people they met on their postings believed the Protocols of the Elders of Zion gave an accurate description of Israel's power. Several of these emissaries told me they did not try to enlighten their counterparts on this issue as it was more convenient to let them believe in this mythical power.

Another manifestation of this mythical power is the belief that Israel or the "Jewish Lobby" controls the US government. That this is false became abundantly clear during the presidency of Barack Obama, who caused Israel a great deal of damage (for instance through the JCPOA deal with Iran, which Israel opposed). The Mossad also has mythical powers and proportions in the minds of some foreigners. These beliefs were reinforced when the Mossad extracted a vast trove of secret documents about Iran's nuclear program from Tehran in the spring of 2018.

Israel also suffers from the myth of weakness. Jews have been powerless for almost two millennia. This has created disproportionate numbers of Israeli and Jewish masochists—and, to a lesser extent, even self-haters—who do much to undermine Israel's power. The more extreme the claims of these distorters of morality, the more useful they are to Israel's enemies. These Jews learned nothing from the Holocaust.

Yet another factor that should not be neglected is religious power. Israel is a small country and Judaism has an extremely limited number of followers compared to the other two monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. Yet Judaism played a significant role in the development of Western civilization—

partly because of its unique relationship with Christianity, the dominant religious force in the West.

Another aspect of soft power is cultural power. In our time, this largely means success in the field of popular culture. A number of Israeli television series have been bought by American TV. Several were shown on Netflix and were very popular among American and other Western audiences.

There is, however, one major field of power in which Israel greatly underperforms. This is the area of diplomatic power and the combating of anti-Israeli propaganda. There is a longstanding continuous assault on Israel at the UN and its associated bodies. Other sources of hostility toward Israel are "human rights" NGOs, academics, trade unions, and the media. Many of these individuals and organizations are liberal, and many characterize themselves as progressives—a perversion of the meaning of the term.

Israel has made attempts to develop the country's brand. None was particularly successful, however, because of the absence of a national counter-propaganda agency. The city of Tel Aviv has attempted to brand itself as separate and different from Israel. The absence of an counter-propaganda agency is a serious shortcoming that leaves Israel easy to slander.

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld was a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center, a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and author of The War of a Million Cuts*. Among the honors he received was the 2019 International Lion of Judah Award of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research paying tribute to him as the leading international authority on contemporary antisemitism.*