How Can Israel Hold a Real Discussion on Values Promoted by National Security?

by Col. (res.) Shai Shabtai

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While the confronting of threats is built into national security, the promotion of values is not generally an organic part of it. But in the current war, Israel must define its fundamental values: its commitment to human life with regard to the hostages; its position on the establishment of settlements in disputed territories; and its view on the price to be paid for peace. The injection of values into national security strategy should be based on deep, orderly discourse on the why, the what and the how. A broad consensus should be reached on how to combine these ideas with the principles of national security while dealing with both the inherent tensions they create and the strategic and operative limitations they present. Such a discussion is substantively different from the belief-based skirmishes of the current national security discourse.

Protecting a country from threats, or, in the case of Israel, maintaining its existence, is the organic and self-evident essence of national security. It is clear, for example, that the existence of the State of Israel in the Middle East for years to come depends on its ability to eradicate Hamas after the October 7 massacre.

But national security is also a way to promote the values of a state – especially in Israel, which bases its existence on the two values of being both Jewish and democratic. The values that national security promotes are determined by the

elected political echelon and are expressed in guidelines (the "directive") given to the security echelon.

These values, about which there is now much public debate, extend the remit of national security beyond protection from threats. Three cases of such public discussion arising from the Iron Swords War are the struggle over how to return the hostages from Gaza, the movement pushing for the re-establishment of settlements in the Gaza Strip, and the call to take advantage of the eradication of Hamas to advance Israel's relations in the region and promote peace through the establishment of a Palestinian state.

This is essentially a debate over three values: Israel's commitment to human life, the importance of a Jewish presence in the entire biblical land of Israel, and the promotion of peace. These discussions are wrapped in seemingly security-related arguments: "The return of the hostages is a national security need because it confirms Israel's political commitment to the personal security of its citizens"; "Only settlements in Gaza will ensure the presence of the IDF in a way that promotes Israel's security"; and "the establishment of a Palestinian state is the key to ensuring Israel's security over time."

In practice, these statements express the beliefs of those who hold them, not a deep and professional national security analysis. Therefore, they are not of much use to national decision-makers as to what values to promote within the framework of national security. They express an empty and pointless debate that wraps fundamental beliefs in a non-systemic security argument and are therefore not relevant to the government's decisions.

So how should we discuss the values national security should promote?

We need to separate the discussion into three levels:

A. **Why?** It is critical to clearly identify the value that is being promoted and determine how high it is in the hierarchy of values that the State of Israel, in the eyes of the believer, must promote. For example, belief in the supremacy of the value of human life over all other considerations reflects belief in the assertion that the hostages must be released at any cost. Belief in the connection between the people of Israel and the complete biblical Land of

Israel reflects belief in the need to settle all parts of the Land of Israel. The desire to maintain a quiet, comfortable, advanced and Western life and to reduce the bloodshed reflects belief in the pursuit of peace through the establishment of a Palestinian state. It is difficult to hold debates on this level because it is in the domain of belief, not realistic decisions.

B. **What?** The various ways these beliefs can be promoted must be defined. For example, the supremacy of the value of human life in the context of the hostages can be expressed in a deal, in bold actions for their release within the framework of the "Entebbe doctrine," or in avoiding deals that surrender to terrorism in the current round in order to eliminate the logic of the other side holding hostages in the next ones. The belief in a Jewish presence in the entire biblical Land of Israel can be expressed in the establishment of settlements, but also in the military possession of territory, the establishment of "Garinei Nahal" (small settlements populated by soldiers), forestry and agriculture, or the establishment of nature reserves. The pursuit of a peaceful life and the reduction of bloodshed can manifest in the pursuit of regional peace agreements, the establishment of a Palestinian state, a separation and seclusion policy, or the development of economic-civil relations. At this level, a substantive debate on the different alternatives can begin.

C. **How?** The practical methods of implementation of the different alternatives must be defined. For instance, a deep commitment to human life can be promoted in a combined form of local swap agreements and military operations. Control over land can be divided between areas where there is a distinct advantage to civilian settlements and areas where it is more logical to establish control in other ways. The pursuit of a peaceful life and the reduction of bloodshed, which requires partners on the other side, can be promoted through various lines of cooperation with them.

The segmentation of belief into the three levels of Why, What and How is only the first step. The more essential need is to examine the broad considerations and decide if to promote these values in the first place. In this framework, several principles should be maintained:

Analysis of tensions and similarities among variables: The differences between the values, the various ways of realizing them, and the defensive requirements of

national security must all be analyzed. To move forward toward a decision, these concepts must be mapped and prioritized. For example, some of the possible components of a hostage deal are in inherent tension with the need for national security to eradicate Hamas and prevent it as much as possible from restoring its military, political and civil power and status. The establishment of settlements in the Gaza Strip stands in tension with a realistic assessment of the severe international opposition there would inevitably be to such a move. The promotion of peace agreements with the Palestinians stands in tension with Israel's operational need to protect against terrorist threats. But good decisions cannot be made based on partial statements. In order to enable good decisions to be made, these tensions and the connections between them must be mapped.

A realistic assessment of the situation: These tensions and connections must be presented in a way that corresponds with a professional and realistic assessment of the strategic and practical situation. Statements like "We can thwart the senior terrorists we release after the deal is completed"; "The world will accept our view on the establishment of settlements in Gaza if we are determined enough"; or "The Palestinians will lose their desire for terrorism as a result of the dynamics of peace" express not a realistic assessment of the situation but the wishful thinking of the believers. They do not promote real discussion but instead constitute second and third lines of defense to help believers deal with the tensions between their desires and reality.

To make brave decisions and stick to them: Adapting a value and manifesting its expression in national security efforts is an inherent part of national conduct in every country and in Israel even more so. If, after a complex and deep discussion, the What and How of a value are identified and viable efforts are found to protect it, it is logical to accept the decision and stick to its implementation. A vague approach of "both this and that" may be convenient for the postponing of difficult decisions but causes lasting damage to national security. One can decide to resort to ambiguity on certain issues, but that decision must represent a conscious choice, not the avoidance of one.

Promoting values within the framework of national security, if done responsibly, will always create a mixture of policies. There are few cases where the right and realistic choice is to "go all the way." Even in the case of issues that appear to be

clear-cut, not "everything" is done. The State of Israel made a realistic choice not to do "everything" to capture, try, or execute the Nazi criminals, even though it had every moral justification to do so. Decisions on issues of value such as the release of the hostages, the establishment of settlements or the promotion of peace will always be a mixture of elements the decision-makers aim to achieve and elements they do not.

Know how to analyze when the reality has changed and an update is required: A dynamic strategic environment requires renewed examinations of the What and the How along the way. The state may have decided not to make certain moves in a certain situation, but a change in the circumstances might put those moves back on the table. For example, the eradication of Hamas leadership in Gaza and perhaps outside it as well could allow Israel to be more generous in negotiations on the release of the hostages; a change of administration in the US could allow a new discussion on the characteristics of the settlements; and the establishment of a new leadership in the Palestinian Authority after Abu Mazen could change the situation regarding the peace process. Discussions on the way fundamental values are realized within the framework of national security are, therefore, dynamic.

Flexibility and deniability: One of the greatest strategic problems facing the State of Israel is the fact that nearly everything is immediately broadcast openly by the media. Decision-makers must have maximum flexibility to make and implement their decisions. Unnecessary discussions in the media that bare every decision to the public damage deniability, which is an essential tool of national security. Most countries in the world – admittedly in democracies it is more difficult – use deniability to advance their national security. It cannot be that only the State of Israel is to be denied this tool because of the needs of media organizations, journalists and commentators. In the promotion of national values there must always be an element of deniability: tacit consent and turning a blind eye.

Knowing when to stop and change course: Some values will remain unrealizable. The decision makers will continue to hold them but will not be able to implement them. This is a healthy part of the democratic and strategic conduct of a country. Many Israelis, including decision-makers, wanted, for moral and historical reasons, to intervene in Syria a decade ago to stop the regime's massacre of innocent civilians, including at distances close to the Israeli border. A realistic

situational assessment of the meaning of such an intervention and the aid and rescue moves it would have entailed stopped Israel from going down that path except to provide local aid, mainly civilian and medical, for residents of the Golan Heights.

A substantive discussion about which values should be realized within the framework of national security during this war is important for the existence of the state. Rather than becoming a pointless series of skirmishes over beliefs, this discussion must be carried out in a professional and serious manner in accordance with the principles outlined above.

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