



# The Challenge of Formulating Israel's First Official National Security Strategy

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** A [recent law](#) requires, for the first time, that any new Israeli government prepare a national security strategy within 150 days of its formation. As general elections are to be held no later than October 2026, Israel may soon approve its first official national security strategy. While this represents an opportunity to impose coherence on the country's misaligned strategic orientation and security doctrine, it comes at a time of strategic and institutional drift following the multi-front wars that ensued in the wake of the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. As the National Security Council is too weak to lead the complex effort to write a cohesive and robust national security strategy, a superficial strategy may instead result that squanders the opportunity provided by the new law. Steps must be taken to ensure that the new strategy is shaped in such a way as to ensure continuous reassessment and to foster constant learning and adaptation in the face of the ever-changing regional landscape.

Israel currently lacks an officially approved national security strategy. A [recent law](#) requires any new government to prepare one within 150 days of its formation. Following the upcoming general elections, to be held no later than October, Israel may finally approve its first official national security strategy.

Israel is thus presented with an unprecedented opportunity to develop conceptual and functional coherence across the currently misaligned levels of strategic orientation, security doctrine, strategy, and military operations and buildup. However, this opportunity comes amid a period of grand strategic and institutional drift in Israel.

In the aftermath of the multi-front wars that followed the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, a proactive, revisionist strategic orientation has been

ossifying, leading to *ad hoc* changes to Israel's national security concept and to the direction of its recommended force build-up. These changes have proceeded with little deliberate, formal decision-making or public debate. To make matters worse, the National Security Council, which is responsible for formulating the new national security strategy, is weak and lacks the bureaucratic depth to lead this complex intellectual and institutional effort effectively within the five-month timeframe set by the new law.

Consequently, there is a danger that a superficial strategy may emerge that squanders the opportunity to develop a cohesive design and identify Israel's security priorities for the next half-decade. To prevent this, the new government should adopt an iterative process and appoint a committee of seasoned practitioners to support and enhance the National Security Council's efforts.

Above all, the new national security strategy needs to be designed and implemented in such a way as to ensure continuous reassessment and foster constant learning and adaptation in the face of the ever-changing regional landscape.

### **Israel's new security strategy law**

The new law calls for developing a strategy to advance Israel's political and security interests and strengthen its national resilience. It was [inspired](#) by models in other countries, including the US, which requires an annual [National Security Strategy report](#).

In the Israeli law's explanatory notes, the drafters note that while Israel's national security concept has never been formalized, it remains an implicit strategic guideline. The prior lack of an explicit security strategy law hindered the adaptation and implementation needed to effectively contend with Israel's ever-changing security environment.

The new law stipulates that the proposed national security strategy 1) address the foundational assumptions about the political and security challenges and opportunities facing Israel; 2) categorize those threats and challenges by severity; and 3) outline alternative means to address them. In broader terms, the strategy needs to determine Israel's political and security objectives, including the goals and interests required to ensure its existence, strength, and security. It must define the political and security challenges facing Israel on an annual and multi-annual basis, including those in the domestic arena.

The responsibility for formulating Israel's national security strategy lies with the National Security Council in consultation with the Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of National Security, the security establishment, and other relevant government ministries. Following its approval, the strategy

will need to be presented to the Knesset's (parliament's) foreign and security committee. Though the document will be classified, a declassified summary will be published.

The new law seeks to turn Israeli national security strategy into a deliberately formulated comprehensive plan. This will require a demanding intellectual and coordination effort at a time when Israel's strategic planning capabilities have been [hollowed out](#) and the national security council is suffering institutional paralysis and weakness.

### **Designing a coherent, prioritized, and balanced strategy**

Coherence, prioritization, and balance are all vital to designing and applying a new national security strategy. The architects of the strategy will face significant challenges across all three criteria.

#### *The risk of incoherence*

The new national security strategy must align with Israel's strategic orientation – which is currently in flux. The shock of the October 7, 2023, attack and the aftermath of the ensuing multi-front war have led to a [reactive shift in Israel's strategic orientation](#). This shift, which was put into practice without deliberation, has moved Israel from its previous status quo status toward the position of revisionist regional power. This drift in strategic orientation fundamentally affects the formulation and risk threshold of the new national security strategy.

Israel has traditionally been [regarded](#) as a status quo power, especially after the 1967 Six-Day War expanded its territory. Israel sought to maintain the post-1967 borders, the alliance with the US, and regional cooperation against revisionist threats from Iran, Hezbollah, or Hamas. Its policies have emphasized stability through deterrence rather than regional overhaul.

The drafters of Israel's unwritten national security concept in the 1950s [concluded](#) that the conflict with the Arabs could not be ended by force and that Israel needed to stand firm until such time as it was accepted in the region. Consequently, Israel [adopted](#) an overall defensive “iron wall” security strategy, executed through an offensive military posture. Israel's traditional status quo strategic orientation implicitly assumed the Arab-Israeli conflict would ultimately be resolved through political measures rather than military force.

This traditional outlook is now in flux. The regional policies of the Netanyahu government following the October 7 attack have shifted toward the more revisionist approach of military force. This has been [framed](#) by right-wing pundits as the need to prevent strategic threats through assertive,

disproportionate coercion and a geopolitical power approach to managing regional relationships and struggles. Though not a consolidated and deliberated position, it has inspired [calls](#) to formulate a new national security concept based on active prevention and has underwritten the force buildup recommendations of the [Nagel Commission](#), which was set up following October 7 to examine Israel’s defense budget and force buildup.

The following table highlights key differences between an Israeli status quo and a revisionist strategic orientation.

	<b>Status quo orientation</b>	<b>Revisionist orientation</b>
<b>Strategic logic</b>	Creating a balance of power based on conflict management and military and technological superiority; willing to make concessions and coexist	Changing the regional order, including regime change, through the elimination of threats; establishing superiority over Arab countries and Iran
<b>Military logic</b>	"Mowing the lawn" and conducting limited strikes	Doing decisive damage to threats
<b>Diplomatic logic</b>	Utilizing diplomatic tools in the service of security with a willingness to conduct strategic restraint. Consideration given to international pressures and norms, importance of international partnerships, peace agreements, and normalization	Emphasis on military tools to maintain superiority with lesser consideration given to international pressures and norms
<b>Borders</b>	Preserving existing borders	Expanding "strategic depth" through "buffer zones" (Syria, Lebanon, Gaza)
<b>Regional order</b>	Containing the "Axis of Resistance" and managing the conflict	Dismantling the "Axis of Resistance" and defeating it entirely
<b>The Palestinian issue</b>	Conflict management	Conflict resolution through the promotion of unilateral steps
<b>Main risks</b>	A reality of continuous confrontation	Prolonged wars, isolation, and the fear of "overextension"

Those responsible for formulating Israel’s new national security strategy will need to establish consistency between their recommendations and Israel’s evolving strategic orientation, national security doctrine, and force posture and

buildup. The lack of official deliberation and cohesion on these components will render their task extremely difficult. The drafters of the national security strategy will need to conduct close discussions with the new government about its grand strategic outlook.

*The difficulty of prioritizing interests and goals*

According to the new law, the national security strategy will have to assess and define Israel’s political and security interests and goals. While these interests and goals are intended to span a five-year period, they should align with the foundational national values embodied in Israel’s [Declaration of Independence](#). These include the desire for peace; the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants, grounded in freedom, justice, and peace; complete equality and freedom of religion; and the ingathering of diaspora Jews.

Given Israel’s challenging strategic reality, it would be impossible to invest the resources needed to achieve all its political and security interests and goals. Priorities will be need to be set, but they will be difficult to define. Doing so will require numerous rounds of coordination with the new government on contentious issues. This will pose an intellectual challenge for those drafting the strategy, given likely uncertainties about the impact of Israel’s new leaders’ [operational codes](#) and levels of risk tolerance.

On the methodological level, dialogue can be advanced through a back-and-forth process that prioritizes interests and goals as critical, very important, important, or desirable, according to regional aims (Iran, Palestinians, Lebanon, Syria, peace and normalization countries, the US, and the global arena) and functional aims (nuclear proliferation, advanced weapons systems, cyber and technology, safeguarding critical infrastructure, independence versus aims dependence, international trade, supply lines, etc.). See illustrative table below:

Critical	Very important	Important	Desirable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserving the independence and sovereignty of Israel as a democratic Jewish nation-state, with a Zionist Jewish majority</li> <li>• Providing physical security for the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserving and developing internal unity, social resilience, and equal rights in Israel</li> <li>• Preventing, deterring, and mitigating significant threats, including terrorism, high-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining at least good relations with Russia and China and preventing them from becoming actively hostile to Israel</li> <li>• Overthrowing the Iranian regime</li> <li>• Creating security stability in Gaza and withdrawing IDF forces from there</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving Israeli public diplomacy</li> <li>• Improving Israel's standing within international organizations</li> </ul>

<p>population and maintaining self-defense capabilities against existential threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preventing, deterring, and mitigating existential threats against Israel, including nuclear proliferation in the Middle East</li> <li>• Ensuring the steadfast support of America</li> <li>• Expanding the circle of peace</li> <li>• Protecting essential national and security infrastructure</li> </ul>	<p>trajectory weapons and the occupation of territory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining technological, military, and civilian superiority</li> <li>• Creating and maintaining stable economic growth</li> <li>• Preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon hostile to Israel</li> <li>• Ensuring the survival of regimes that support peaceful relations</li> <li>• Reaching an accommodation with the Palestinians</li> <li>• Improving strategic decision-making processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing political-security relations with key countries in the international arena, and preventing sanctions and the isolation of Israel</li> <li>• Normalization with additional Arab and Muslim countries</li> <li>• Developing arrangements/agreements with Syria and Lebanon</li> <li>• Supporting Diaspora Jewry</li> <li>• Improving governance and the fight against crime</li> <li>• Increasing bipartisan American support for Israel</li> </ul>	
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Given Israel’s coalition-based governance, any new government will likely reflect a left-center-right divide, making consensus on the prioritization of interests and goals difficult to achieve. Coalition governments in Israel [reinforce](#) a preference for short-term, reactive planning. Ideological considerations are likely to shape discussions about the prioritization of interests and goals. The Palestinian issue is particularly sensitive but central to other interests and goals, including improving Israel’s regional and international relations.

Challenges to the prioritizing of the new government's preferences can result in an unranked list of narrow and vaguely worded interests and goals, undermining the law's intent to increase coherence across the different levels of Israel's political and security grand strategy.

### *The problem of balance*

Israel's national security strategy must be balanced both externally and internally. Externally, Israel must recognize its advantages and limitations to avoid an unbalanced strategic approach. On the one hand, it must not underestimate its power and capabilities, which would prevent the deployment of the resources necessary to achieve its interests and goals. On the other hand, it must avoid adopting an overly ambitious strategy that creates overextension and weakens the nation. At the very least, the new national security strategy must ensure an improvement in Israel's strategic position compared to the "baseline situation" on the day the government takes office.

This brings us back to Israel's strategic orientation. Even if one accepts the rationale for a more proactive national security strategy, Israel has limited overall resources. It likely has the military and technological capabilities for a more assertive regional approach, and the public may be sufficiently supportive and resilient to make such an approach feasible. However, Israel lacks the economic and political depth to sustain prolonged confrontation and faces increasingly limited American support for Israeli revanchism.

Israel's internal balance relies on the aligning of interests and goals with available resources and on balancing persistence with flexibility in the face of change. Given the large-scale expenditures on multi-front fighting over the last two and a half years, which have necessitated an increase in the Israeli defense budget and the large-scale call-up of reservists who, during times of peace, drive and stimulate the economy, Israel faces [economic and fiscal constraints](#) that render a revisionist regional approach based on power projection an overreach.

Moreover, as the law stipulates, the new national security strategy must also address Israel's internal front. Economic constraints are being compounded by [deep political and ideological divisions](#) in Israeli society. The present government's attempt to advance a [legal and institutional revolution](#) has brought strong societal divisions to the fore. In addition, lawlessness is on the rise, especially among Israel's Arab community, and the country's governance is being challenged by the Bedouin in [Israel's southern Negev](#).

Any new national security strategy will therefore need to rebuild Israel's internal strength, unity, and resilience to better cope with its complex and

threatening external environment. This requires striking the right balance among Israel's internal and external interests and goals, as well as among its distribution of means.

### **Building in a continuous evaluation loop**

Israel's ability to adapt to changing circumstances is crucial to its security and well-being in the volatile Middle East. The benefits of developing an official national security strategy must not be outweighed by a rigidity that undermines Israel's innovative character.

As Ionut Popescu rightly [points out](#), emergent learning is at least as important and sometimes more important for strategic success than following a devised strategy. Thus, Israel's national security strategy needs not only to be coherent, prioritized, and balanced, but must also be able to incorporate emergent learning and to enable elements of the strategy, or even the whole strategy, to be reworked.

This would require Israel's decision makers to be open to periodic assessments of the strategy's implementation. Strategy review could be initiated either top-down, based on leadership requests, or bottom-up, based on professional unease about the strategy's alignment with developments. Regardless of whether potential learning is initiated top-down or bottom-up, periodic assessments should be built into the implementation process to ensure continuous reassessment of the strategy's efficacy.

### **Institutional weakness**

Israel's National Security Council is institutionally weak. It has been leaderless since October 2025, when the Prime Minister [dismissed](#) the previous National Security Advisor and head of the National Security Council, Tzachi Hanegbi. The Deputy Head of the National Security Council is leaving to take on a new role in the Ministry of Defense, and it is unlikely that a new head will be appointed before the elections. Additional National Security Council roles have yet to be filled or will be vacated in the near future.

Following the elections, the newly appointed National Security Advisor and head of the National Security Council will face not only an intellectual and coordination challenge in formulating a new national security strategy vis-à-vis the new government, but also an organizational challenge. The National Security Council will need to effectively mobilize the participation of the other organizations involved in the process as it reforms and strengthens itself.

## **How to avoid just going through the motions**

Israel has an unprecedented opportunity to formulate and formalize its first-ever officially approved national security strategy, in which it lays out its political and security interests and goals for the coming years in a coherent, prioritized, and balanced manner with built-in continuous reassessment. However, given the challenges of so comprehensive and collaborative an intellectual effort amid institutional weakness and serious strategic drift, this first attempt to formulate an official national security strategy may fall short.

Such a deficit could take the form of “cutting-and-pasting” from existing annual strategic assessment documents and/or cabinet directives. Thus, while the new government might ostensibly submit a new national security strategy, the submission could be a façade that undermines the law’s intention.

Several steps can be taken that would mitigate the intellectual and institutional challenges ahead.

First, a new National Security Advisor and head of the National Security Council should coordinate with the new government to set expectations for the interactive nature of the process. The dialogue between the National Security Council and the new government on defining Israel’s interests and goals needs to be iterated until final conclusions are drawn. Following this, strategy formulation would move to presenting and approving policy options to advance and achieve those interests and goals.

Second, given the National Security Council’s present weakness, a committee of seasoned practitioners should be appointed to supplement and enhance the institutional staff’s work. This committee would report to the National Security Advisor and command the professional respect of the other security organizations, helping to streamline the collaborative process.

Third, the new government could, if necessary, extend the submission deadline for the national security strategy document to increase the likelihood that the new strategy meets, at a minimum, the standards of coherence, prioritization, balance, and continuous reassessment.

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