

Analyzing Israel's Ontological Security: The Impact of the October 7th Hamas Attack on Israel's Core Identities

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Abstract:

As Jennifer Mitzen underscores in her study titled "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", in addition to physical security, states also seek ontological security. Ontological security refers to the need for individuals to feel secure in their identities, as deep uncertainties can threaten this sense of identity security. Whether cooperative or conflictual, ontological security, as Mitzen underscores, plays a crucial role in understanding the stability of social relationships. This study aims to analyze Israel's ontological security within the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on the impact of Hamas's brutal terror attack on October 7th on Israel's three core identities: Jewishness, Democracy and the role of a Security Provider.

Part 1 Shaping the Jewish Identity: From Historical Traumas to the Founding of the State of Israel

Part 2 The Threatened State: Israel's Routinized Insecurity After 1947

Part 3 Hamas Terror Attack on October 7th: Threat to the Israeli-Jewish Identity

Part 4 From Democratic Crisis and Failure to Unity: Hamas Aggression Strengthens Israel's Zionist and Security Provider Identity

Part 5 Hamas's Sabotage of the Two-State Solution: Ontological Insecurity, Deepened Division, Shattered Trust

Conclusion

Shaping the Jewish Identity: From Historical Traumas to the Founding of the State of Israel

To understand how Israel seeks ontological security, it is important to delve into the historical shaping of the Israeli identity briefly. Jewishness, which is the core of the Israeli identity, is founded on two overarching elements: religion and ethnic belonging. As Charles Liebman and Bernard Susser argue, *"Jewishness is fundamental to their identity perceptions, and the idea of disengaging Israel from the Jewish peoplehood and its history is, for them, unthinkable."* Jewish people acquire their cognitively unique selves through many cultural-Biblical references, according to which they are God's chosen nation.

During the 18th century, Jewish people tried assimilating or homogenizing into European countries. However, with the emergence of Marx's essay titled, "On the Jewish Question", Jewish people needed to seek out ways of survival and security.

They had two options: either assimilate into the European nation-states they lived in, which meant physical security but the annihilation of the behavioural routines of a Jewish self, or establish their own legally secured homeland in Palestine.

In the 19th century, Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism and spiritual father of the Jewish state, realized that even though assimilation of the Jewish people would be most desirable because of anti-Semitism, it was impossible to realize. Therefore, he argued that if external pressure forced Jews to form a secure nation for all Jewish people, concentration in one territory, specifically Palestine, was essential for a normal existence. In the 1910s, Zionist lobbying led to the Balfour Declaration, aiming to establish a British-protected Jewish "national home" in Palestine. These efforts that preceded the declaration of the State of Israel aimed to form a new Jewish self and ensure its existence. Zionists founded the national legislature, later recognized as the Israeli Parliament, organized multi-party elections, and established courts under British Common Law. In addition to these crucial initiatives, they revitalized the ancient Hebrew language based on the Cartesian principle of the new Jewish self. It was important as the Hebrew language was almost extinct until Jewish autonomy was established. By March 1925, the officially estimated Jewish population in Palestine stood at 108,000, and it increased to approximately 238,000, constituting 20 per cent of the total population, by 1933. In the meantime, the aggression between Palestinian and Jewish communities escalated during the 1920s and the 1936–39 Arab Revolt. To ensure the Jewish existence, the paramilitary force, Haganah, was created.

Amaz Umut Can Adisönmez highlighted in his study that Jewish ontological security is deeply connected to the memory of historical traumas of suffering from different forms of anti-Semitism, especially during the Holocaust, which created an introverted, isolated Jewish self. As Adisönmez highlights, *"the centuries-old routinized fear and existential insecurities that Jews have encountered have, therefore, contributed significantly to the formation of a mistrustful cognitive cocoon."* The

cocoon emerged as a dominant ontological security provider, as persistent fears and insecurities motivated Jews to seek refuge through the Zionist movement.

The year 1947 was a significant turning point for the Zionist dream as the UN proposed the Partition Plan of Palestine, in which the UN offered a state to Jewish and Palestinian people as well. The Partition Plan was accepted by Jewish representatives but rejected by the leader of the Palestinian Arabs, Mufti Hajj Amin Husseini, which is why the Arab world started the 1948 war against Israel. The disagreement between the two camps transformed an ongoing civil war into an all-out war between Arabs and Israelis in 1948, which resulted in a Jewish victory and the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. As David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, said in The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel speech in 1948 May 14th, the Holocaust *"was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the community of nations."* As from the Declaration of Independence speech it can be read "the Land of Israel" was the birthplace of the Jewish people where their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped.

The Threatened State: Israel's Routinized Insecurity After 1947

Since 1947, the Palestinian leaders have continually denied the legitimacy of the Jewish State and rejected all peace treaties. The continual denial of Israel's legitimacy and rejection of peace treaties perpetuates a narrative of Israel as a threatened state, heightening the need to protect its ontological security among its populace. The continual Palestinian rejection of offered peace initiatives also created a sense for Israel that Palestinian leaders are not committed to achieving peace, which would ensure the welfare and safety of the Palestinian people. Since

1948, a sense of insecurity has permeated Israel's socio-political landscape, giving rise to a chronic syndrome of insecurity among Israelis. Therefore, this routinized insecurity, fueled by the early conflicts and in opposition to the Palestinian Other, has become an integral component of the Israeli mistrustful cognitive cocoon.

According to Mitzen, state distinctiveness to a constructed narrative of the Other is relevant to establishing ontological security. While creating the new, stronger self of Jewishness, Israel created the Other as Arabs, not as Palestinians who are posing a constant threat to the Jewish State. The historical reason why Israelis often identify Palestinians as Arabs is based on the Jewish narrative that "Palestine" is the term coined by the Romans in the second century CE as part of their efforts to sever the ties between rebellious Jews and their land. By naming the land "Palestine," the Romans purposely associated it with the Philistines, who once predominantly inhabited certain coastal and inland areas. In doing so, the Romans sought to punish the Jews for resisting their authority and aimed to erase the living Jewish heritage from the country.

As a fundamental need, ontological security operates in all social contexts, cooperative or conflictual. In her essay, Amir Lupovitz cites Terrel A. Northrup, capturing a core element of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: *"Both sides assert that to preserve our identity, we must inhabit and possess the land symbolizing ourselves, our religion, and our meaning. The loss or threat of losing that land signifies a profound loss of the self."* Northrup's quote underscores the profound challenge in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as both sides deeply intertwine their identity, religion, and meaning in the land they constantly fight for.

The security dilemma, a concept in international relations, posits that the actions taken by one state to enhance its security can be perceived as a threat by others, leading to an escalatory cycle. As Mitzen states, *"An important premise of the security dilemma theory is that states seek a physical protection of their territory and*

governance structure from others who can cause material harm.” However, as aforementioned, physical security is not the only kind of security states seek; they also need ontological security. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ontological security modifies security dilemmas by introducing identity-driven insecurities that extend beyond the conventional military realm. For Israel, the survival of the Jewish state is not only a strategic imperative but a fundamental aspect of its ontological security. As a result, actions taken to ensure survival, such as constructing security barriers or military operations, are deeply rooted in the need for a stable and recognizable identity.

Hamas Massacre on October 7th: Threat to the Israeli-Jewish Identity

Amir Lupovitz delineates Israel's identities, characterizing it as a Jewish state with three primary facets: Jewishness, the role of a security provider, and a commitment to democratic principles. Jewish religious traditions have shaped the Israeli ethos but, in a traditionalist, (historical nationalist) rather than a strictly religious manner. The Israeli-Jewish identity draws from religious origins, incorporating symbols, practices, and language, yet it is essentially a non-religious identity. Being Jewish is not solely about the individual's connection to the religion but extends to their affiliation with the Jewish people. However, following the 1967 War, the Israeli-Jewish identity appears to have taken on a more Judaic character and less civic orientation, with the land of Israel playing a more prominent role in the Jewish national identity.

In his opinion article, Michael Goldfarb explains that Hamas's brutal terror assault against Israeli civilians on October 7th—the worst single act against Jewish people since the Holocaust—shaped the modern Israeli identity and, as Goldfarb writes, *“taken back to the lessons of what history have taught us: to be a Jew is to be hated, not by everyone, but always, somewhere in the world, someone will hate you.”*

During the Yom Kippur War, Anwar Sadat initiated the Egyptian Army's movement across the Suez Canal into Sinai in 1973 with a genuine geopolitical objective: to compel Israel to negotiate the return of territory and, as a secondary goal, restore national pride in Egypt. However, Hamas has no interest in negotiating a division of the land, and the terrorist organization pursues no geopolitical objectives. Or Yissachar, the Head of Research of the Israel Defence and Security Forum (IDSF), emphasised in his speech at the Danube Institute conference titled "Israel, the War and the Israeli-Christian Relations in Crisis" that the outbreak of the current war on October 7th was much worse than the Yom Kippur War as that was a "fair fight" between two armies. In contrast, on October 7th, Hamas did not attack Israeli soldiers but more than 1200 civilians, including babies, women, men, and elderly who were sleeping in their homes, dancing and going about their lives, with the terrorists invading their communities, massacring them or taking them hostage.

Hamas openly claims it wants to annihilate the Jewish state and would repeat the mass massacre of Israeli civilians again and again, which poses not only a psychological but ontological security threat to Israelis as their Zionist identity, as aforementioned, is closely tied to their land. Therefore, the fear of losing their land created an ontological insecurity among the Jewish nation.

From Democratic Crisis and Failure to Unity: Hamas Aggression Strengthens Israel's Zionist and Security Provider Identity

Israel's second identity of being a democratic state was challenged in recent times with the debate over the reform of the Israeli Supreme Court, which posed an ontological security threat to Israel's democratic identity. Dr Gábor Balázs, the acting rector and historian of ideas at OR-ZSE, highlighted at the Danube Institute conference that the debate over the Supreme Court reform was the most severe crisis the State of Israel had faced in years. The expert argued that since the

October 7th massacre, this crisis has understandably been almost forgotten, but it is far from certain that it will not be at the center of Israeli society again after the war against Hamas. Dr Gábor Balázs highlighted that although there were several legal issues currently being debated in the country, “the conflict is mainly over the notion of Judaism and democracy.”

As Lubovitzki argued, terror attacks usually strengthen the Israeli-Jewish identity. Following October 7th, “people have united in the face of the Hamas aggression, putting aside national divisions”, as the Israeli ambassador to Hungary, His Excellency Yacov Hadas-Handelsman, highlighted in his speech at the Danube Institute’s conference. Israelis and Jewish people around the world put away their divisions in a matter of hours and, united in their Zionist identity, helped those affected and in need. Thousands of reservists have been mobilized, a large number of citizens have volunteered for service, communities provided homes to evacuated families and essential items, volunteers offered shopping assistance and childcare and psychologists, trauma experts, and social workers offered their services. Additionally, people are actively participating in ensuring there are enough individuals for the continuous funeral services for those we have lost.

This unity of Israelis in the face of the war showed what Adele Reamer, a journalist and activist who lives 2 km away from the Gaza Strip in Kibbutz Nirim, said in an interview: “People in Israel have different views, but it does not make them any less patriotic; any less Zionist.”

Israel’s third identity lies in being a security provider. As Mira M. Sucharov emphasizes, Israel is a “defensive warrior” that must actively secure its existence. Lubovitzki argues that self-reliance is a core element of the Israeli security approach. This commitment is underscored by the historical trauma of the Holocaust and the perceived hostile political surroundings in which Israel finds itself. Arab threats are often viewed through an existential lens, leading to

proactive measures to prevent the recurrence of another Holocaust. On October 7th, Israel shockingly failed to be the security provider for those Israeli civilians who were murdered and taken hostage. Despite this failure, Israel, with the united support of its citizens, restrengthened its identity as a security provider. As Yissachar highlighted at the Danube Institute's conference, Israel regained security on the Gaza border through extensive fighting and clearly outlined the war's intentions for the first time in 50 years: to oust Hamas from governance, destroy its military capability, and free all Israeli hostages. As Elie Piepz, the director of international relations of IDSF, emphasized in the Danube Institute's podcast titled "Reflections from Budapest", destroying Hamas is crucial for Israelis to regain both psychical and ontological security as "the existence of Israel is at stake—either Hamas is completely destroyed militarily, or Israel will cease to exist."

Hamas's Sabotage of the Two-State Solution: Ontological Insecurity, Deepened Division, Shattered Trust

The psychological and ontological security threats posed by Hamas have deepened divisions and shattered trust between Israelis and Palestinians, further diminishing the prospects of a two-state solution or peace in the near future. Israel, in an effort to pursue peace and security, unilaterally withdrew settlements and troops from Gaza in 2005. However, the subsequent election of Hamas as the governing power in Gaza and their refusal to seek peace with Israel reinforced the need for security measures. The bitter experience in Gaza following the disengagement highlighted, according to the IDSF's report, that *"the last thing the State of Israel needs is withdrawal from further territory where a terror laboratory can develop undisturbed and produce one of the most horrible massacres Jewry has known."* Consequently, Israel has had to intensify its routinized conflict resolution

method, “deOtherization” of its land through walls and checkpoints to safeguard the Jewish state from detached external threats.

The fact that Hamas attacked those kibbutzim and murdered those who fought for peace, two-state solutions and cooperation with their Palestinian neighbours also deepened the conflict and resulted in even less support for a peaceful solution for the conflict. The targeted region has been far more supportive of engaging in negotiations towards a two-state solution compared to the broader Israeli society, which has notably veered to the right since the breakdown of peace talks more than two decades ago. In Nir Oz, Be’eri, and Kfar Aza—three of the kibbutzim severely affected by the Hamas attacks—right-wing parties secured an average of less than 10% of the vote in last year's elections. A recent poll revealed that among Israelis identifying as left-wing, 83% supported a two-state solution, whereas only 16% on the right expressed similar views. These kibbutzim were once bastions of the left, with individuals actively promoting cooperation with Arabs, according to Israeli historian Benny Morris. However, the October 7th attacks, resulting in the mass killing of civilians, have significantly weakened the left's standing in Israel. Advocates in southern Israel, previously committed to harmonious coexistence with Palestinians, now grapple with ontological insecurity toward their Palestinian neighbours following the assaults. To mention an example, before October 7th, an Israeli citizen, Dabush, was among a minority on the left advocating for peace talks with Hamas. However, after Hamas' brutal massacre, his perspective shifted, asserting that the group must be eradicated. "Right now, I cannot see any way that we, the communities there, and my family can live with Hamas on the border," he remarked.

In general, support for peace talks with the Palestinian Authority among Israeli Jews declined from 47.6% in September to 24.5% in a survey carried out in late October by Tel Aviv University's Peace Index. Similarly, backing for a two-state

solution among Jewish Israelis decreased from 37.5% in September to 28.6% following the attacks, as reported by the poll.

The different narratives in which Palestinians and Israelis see the conflict also made it nearly impossible to resolve the conflict in the foreseeable future. There are different views about how much of the Palestinian population supports Hamas. According to the IDSF's report, it is a myth that the majority of Palestinians do not support Hamas, as data indicates that a significant segment of the population strongly backs the terror organization. This support extends to the potential election of Hamas in a significant majority, regardless of political configurations or opponents, as evidenced by social media trends, Palestinian street sentiment, student elections in universities, and large-scale demonstrations in Gaza and Ramallah. Empirical evidence and qualitative analyses of Palestinian public opinion leave little room for doubt: Hamas enjoys considerable support among ordinary Palestinians, and acknowledging this reality is crucial.

A survey conducted by the Arab World Research and Development Group (AWRAD) in the first week of November also revealed shocking results: nearly 60% of Gaza and West Bank Palestinians strongly supported the "military operation carried out by the Palestinian resistance led by Hamas on October 7th." An additional 16 per cent expressed moderate support. In total, three-quarters of respondents expressed support for the indefensible act.

The survey delves into the perceived primary motivations behind the "operation." Notably, 35% cited the objective to "stop violations of Al-Aqsa," aligning with the historical context of the region, where perceived offences against Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque have historically triggered intense conflicts. Another 29% mentioned the broader goal of "freeing Palestine," while 21% believed the attack aimed to break the siege on Gaza. Half of the respondents opted for a version of freedom, surpassing the Al-Aqsa response by 15 points. However, it is important to mention

that the influence of terrorist groups may lead some individuals to withhold their true opinions in such surveys.

As Anthony H. Cordesman phrased in an article, *“The ongoing fighting now warns that two-state solution may not be totally dead but is so close to death that efforts to revive it are likely to be little more than acts of zombie diplomacy.”*

Conclusion

The unprecedented, vicious terror attack orchestrated by Hamas on October 7th has left a lasting impact on Israel's identity, casting a significant shadow over its quest for ontological security. Examining the three core facets of Israeli identity—Jewishness, Democracy, and its role as a Security Provider—revealed the serious consequences of the attack. The October 7th massacre not only inflicted immediate physical harm but also posed a potent threat to Israel's foundational elements, prompting a collective response and reshaping the nation's identity. In the aftermath, the unity of the Jewish people emerged as a powerful force, reinforcing Israel's dedication to its Zionist identity and its role as a security provider. However, the scale and brutality of the Hamas attack deepened divisions, shattered trust between Israelis and Palestinians, and sabotaged the possibility of a two-state solution in the foreseeable future. The complex interplay of historical traumas, identity construction, and the relentless pursuit of security underscores the intricate challenges that Israel faces in navigating its ontological security amidst the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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