

Israel's Security Elite don't Want Peace

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Hidden away both behind the Haaretz paywall and in its business pages is one of the most astute articles I've seen in the Israeli media. It tells how Israel (more so even than other western states) has been taken over by a security elite - what is termed here a "security network" - that has no interest in peace, though it increasingly likes an endless peace process. War and security are good for business, as far as this elite is concerned.

It is more than possible, as the article notes, that the Palestinian leadership is part of this security network. An academic quoted observes: "I think that in both elites, the Israeli and Palestinian, some want this perpetual state of a nation-waiting-to-be-born, and benefit from it. An established state means not only grave social problems but also limitations and constraints on the political leadership."

The first half of the article is equally interesting but of more parochial concern regarding what Guy Rolnik, one of Haaretz's best writers, calls Israel's "independent tax militias", corporations that have ramped up the cost of living through government-sanctioned cartel practices.

So people have a chance to read it, I'm appending the second half of the article:

I have constantly maintained that there is no connection between the threats Israel faces and its defense expenditure. Like all big systems, the defense establishment is preoccupied mainly with its own survival, with increasing its clout and budget. And now let us ask the real question: Do the interests of the defense establishment lead to a waste of billions upon billions, but also block any chance of diplomatic understandings in the region?

I asked these questions of Prof. Oren Barak, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who recently published the book "Israel's Security Networks" together with Prof. Gabriel Sheffer (Cambridge University Press). The two claim that much of local politics, and economic and social affairs can be explained through the excessive influence of the "security network," as they call it.

They claim that since Israel's establishment, and mainly since the Six-Day War, an informal but powerful security network has been evident, consisting of security officers (on active duty and retired) and their civilian cohorts. This network affects the culture, the politics, society, the economy and the public debate. It also impacts Israel's foreign relations. The two experts describe the weakness of Israeli civilian society and explain that it's in the interest of the security networks to keep it that way, relegating economic, cultural and civilian considerations to the margins.

I asked Barak if behind the arguments on the territories and the peace process, something simpler lies – a powerful interest group fighting to preserve its status; a defense clique that managed to bend foreign policy, politics and the budget to its interests.

“Yes, that is exactly what we claim in the book,” Barak says. “It isn’t a club in the sense of a place where people meet, but of people who share the same beliefs and values, first and foremost the supremacy of security as they perceive and represent it, with the Israeli army as its main representative.”

Those involved in this network can certainly collude to advance policy that serves their interests, Barak continues: “The defense budget is an outstanding example of the might and influence the security network has. Each year you can see how they frustrate any attempt to reduce that budget, and often act to increase it after its formal approval by Knesset. That explains the big gap between the approved budget and actual one.”

Fifty-two years ago Dwight Eisenhower warned the American public about that very thing: a club of generals and arms-dealers conquering U.S. foreign and defense policy. He coined the phrase “the military-industrial complex,” and indeed that club has dragged America into war after war during the last 50 years.

Isn’t the Israeli security junta, which inflated the defense budget to 70 billion shekels, essentially an Israeli military-industrial complex?

“When Eisenhower spoke in 1961 about the complex in the U.S., he was talking about its formation following the Cold War and the U.S.’ massive arms buildup, which could create ‘misplaced power’... he was warning the American people about what could happen. What we’re talking about in Israel’s case isn’t theoretical, it’s reality: The security network exists and penetrates a great many public areas, including politics, society, the economy and the culture.”

Take the gas found in the Israeli seabed, Barak says. Right after its discovery, a process of “securitizing” the gas began – meaning it morphed from a civilian issue to being tagged as a military one, with the help of the security network. Since it had become a military issue, it suddenly became important to produce the gas quickly, lest it fall into enemy hands and now also to protect the gas-drilling sites using costly new boats. “That’s exactly how the security network operates: frame a topic as military, and take it away from the civilian apparatus – the public, the Knesset, the government,” Barak says.

There are claims that a military-industrial complex arose anew in the United States, especially given the interminable war on terrorism, he notes. Israel isn’t a military empire like America, but it does have massive defense exports and, of course areas that need protecting within and beyond its borders.

“In the book we discuss cases like the Israeli case: a small country facing a genuine or imagined existential threat, which chose to build a large military establishment that is not separate from the civilian sector. Good examples of this include South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa and Singapore,” says Barak.

Both Israel's left- and right-wing parties frame the debate on the Palestinian issue as ideological, religious, cultural and historic, and associate the inability to reach a solution with the ideology of the leaders, religion, history and so forth. The simpler possibility, the incentives of the leaders, is not seriously discussed in Israel or elsewhere, Barak says.

Could it be that the peace process is stuck because the status quo, meaning war and unending tension alongside an interminable peace process, serve the security, diplomatic and political elites in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the Arab world and in the other involved countries?

"I think the state of perpetual war in our area serves the security network, because it creates a need for the unique skills of its members as security experts. I do not necessarily claim that all the network members are warmongers. Some sobered up and acknowledge the importance of regional peace ... but most still look at things through a gun-sight, and even when involved in a diplomatic process, they view it mainly as a defense issue, not a civilian one . Oslo began as a civilian initiative and underwent securitization."

The left views Israel's leadership as bearing the main responsibility for the failure to progress in peace talks. Could there be elements on the Palestinian side who also want to perpetuate the process, because in the event of the establishment of an independent state, they'd have to contend with serious social problems?

"I think that in both elites, the Israeli and Palestinian, some want this perpetual state of a nation-waiting-to-be-born, and benefit from it. An established state means not only grave social problems but also limitations and constraints on the political leadership, such as clear boundaries vis-a-vis not only the nation and its neighbors, but in areas such as politics, the economy, society, the army and religion. It's a lot easier to be an unborn state fighting for its existence against a hostile world ... It's quite clear that a Palestinian state, if one arises, and that's highly doubtful, will be a failing state dependent on others, like Israel and the European Union, which is not a tempting scenario for its leaders. Look at South Sudan."

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