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The Wall and the Flood

The Repercussions of 7 October for Israel's Existential Security

Strategic Analyses No. 11

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Introduction

The 7 October attack dealt a significant blow to Israel's concept of its Iron Wall, a notion built on the twin principles of offensive and defensive military power, and which forms the basis of Israel's system of deterrence. This paper examines how Israel is attempting to repair its Iron Wall through brutal aggression against the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, and how the cracking of that wall poses an existential threat to the state. It is no coincidence that on 7 October 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu changed the name of Israel's assault on Gaza from "Iron Swords" to "Renaissance" or "Resurrection", evoking a name given to Israel's war of independence in 1948 to indicate that the state is undergoing a watershed moment and being established for a second time. In this view, if the 1948 "Renaissance" War was a response to the Holocaust, the second Renaissance War is a response to the catastrophe of 7 October.

The concept of the Iron Wall is based on two articles by prominent Zionist figure Ze'ev Jabotinsky, both published in November 1923. The idea was to form the backbone of Zionist and Israeli security doctrine.¹ It centres on the concept of military power: the Zionist project must rely on superior military power over the Arabs and repeatedly defeat them until they reach the conclusion that they cannot prevail over the Zionist project and must therefore accept it. In an article entitled "The Iron Wall (We and the Arabs)," Jabotinsky wrote: "Zionist colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population. Which means that it can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population – behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach."²

Contrary to the dominant discourse in Israel's public sphere and among its political elite, Jabotinsky recognizes in his articles that Zionism is a colonial project, that the Palestinians are the country's original inhabitants, and that they will continue to resist and reject the Zionist project. Only repeated defeats and repulsion of their attacks can convince them to acquiesce in it. Thus, the whole idea of the Iron Wall is based on military strength and invincibility, in order to kill off Arab and Palestinian hopes of defeating the Zionist project in Palestine.

The Iron Wall and Israel's System of Deterrence

Since its inception, Israel has relied on concept of the Iron Wall and on its military superiority over the Arabs. While the notion of the wall sets out from the principles of attacking and achieving victory in wars and confrontations against the Arabs and Palestinians in order to force them to accept the existence of a Jewish state in the region, and even reconcile with it, the concept has evolved to include defence as well. This involves neutralizing the offensive capabilities of Arabs and Palestinians, and thwarting their ability to undermine Israel as a state and society.

1 Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York/ London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

2 Ze'ev Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall," *Jabotinsky Institute*, p. 6., accessed on 10/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mrsutn25>



If during the early decades of the State of Israel, the Iron Wall drew a metaphorical aspect from brute military force, today it has abstract dimensions represented by the construction of multiple layers of defence around the state – underground and above ground, in the form of walls, obstacles, and multiple layers of air defences (from the Iron Dome system to Arrow 3). This has turned Israel into a kind of military barracks, fortified by a metaphorical Iron Wall underground, overground and in the sky. Accordingly, Israel's deterrence system no longer relies solely on its offensive capabilities, but also on its defensive ones: just as an attack aims to inflict a high cost on any adversary threatening Israel, defensive operations aim to break his will to attack, demonstrating to him that he cannot achieve anything by attacking, and will pay a high price with zero return, due to Israel's defence system.

Despite all this, the concept of the Iron Wall has failed time and time again to subjugate the Palestinians and force them to accept the Zionist project. Over the 100 years since Jabotinsky proposed the concept, the wall – which was supposed to be a temporary phase leading to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, after which the Palestinians would acquiesce – has failed to persuade the Palestinians to surrender to the Zionist project and the ongoing colonial enterprise in Palestine. One of Jabotinsky's mistakes was that he failed to recognize the conflict between the interests of the colonial project and the existence and interests of the "native population," as he called them. Rather, he saw opposition to colonialism as an emotional issue, a trend that would quickly fade as the colonial project took root in the land.³

Thus, the idea of the Iron Wall was built on the premise that the state could only be established by military force, but Israel's leaders soon understood that the establishment of this state would not force the Arabs to accept it, nor would the Palestinians submit to it. The doctrine of the Iron Wall continued to assume that peace with the Arabs could be achieved by military force alone.⁴

The Al-Aqsa Flood and the Cracking of the Iron Wall

In November 2023, Jabotinsky's eponymous grandson published an article in which he argued that cracks had appeared in the Iron Wall since the Oslo Accords (1993), culminating in Gaza militants' Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (2023), and that Israel must plug those gaps in the Wall.⁵ His article took a far-right stance on the Iron Wall, arguing that post-Oslo transformations had left cracks in the Wall, most importantly by ceding parts of "the Land of Israel" to the Palestinians, a shift that contrasts with the traditional concept of the Iron Wall.

The 7 October attacks indeed left a deep crack in Israel's Iron Wall, on two important levels. First, it broke the supposedly impenetrable defensive barrier that separated Gaza from Israel, despite the

³ Dan Ben-Yishi, "Jabotinsky and his mistakes: 100 years of the Iron Wall," *Sicha Mekomit*, 7/11/2023, accessed 9/10/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/45yv6bce>

⁴ Avi Shlaim, "The Iron Wall Revisited," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2012), pp. 80 - 98.

⁵ Ze'ev Jabotinsky (junior), "We cracked the "Iron Wall" and now it is up to us to plug the gaps," *Israel Hayom*, 5/11/2023, accessed on 9/10/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/5axkmzza>



considerable resources that went into building what was meant to be an impregnable barricade, capable of repelling attacks on Israel and providing early warning of any potential such attacks. Secondly, the operation exposed Israel as a militarily fragile state, at least while the attack was underway, necessitating a credible US guarantee of Israel's security from the first day of the operation, represented in President Joe Biden's "don't attack Israel" speech of 18 October 2023.

Israel's traditional national security system has been based on three recognisable concepts: deterrence, decisiveness, and early warning. From these notions emerged Israeli military and security doctrines such as the idea of taking the battle to the enemy's home turf, civilian readiness for military service (in the form of the Israeli reserve system), and a stance aimed at winning wars quickly rather than allowing them to drag on.

This was the dominant thinking for decades, but it gradually became clear that while it was suited to traditional wars, it was inappropriate for a modern conflict pitting a regular army against a militant organization, even if the latter possesses some of the features of a regular army.

Israel's aggression against the Gaza Strip from October 2023 was not its first such conflict. It has engaged in multiple conflicts of this type since the 1970s. However, it has hitherto been Israel that initiated military operations or battles against armed organizations, especially Palestinian ones. In two cases, Israel saw its military campaigns against such groups as wars: its invasions of Lebanon in 1982 and in July 2006.

Recent conflicts have shifted Israel's security theory and transformed its three main pillars: deterrence, decisiveness, and early warning. The problem was that no strike or operation could ever achieve deterrence against militant organizations, and nor could a decisive resolution be achieved – that is, Israel could never be said to have settled the confrontation. This meant that recent confrontations have fuelled heated domestic debates over their success or failure. The persistence of these debates implies that there is no consensus within Israel that the country has resolved its conflicts with what Israelis describe as the image of victory which would constitute a decisive resolution, such as the images, seared in the Israeli consciousness, of the June 1967 war, when paratroopers entered the Old City of Jerusalem and stood next to the southern wall of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound (known to Jews as the "Wailing Wall").

Shifts in Israeli Security Doctrine Following the Gaza War

Much has been written about the shock the 7 October attacks delivered to Israel. "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" represented the collapse of the concept of deterrence that had long prevailed among the political and military elites, which stemmed from the assumption that Hamas had become a fully-fledged quasi-government, and would not be willing to sacrifice its resources, and that through successive military operations against the movement, Israel had been able to deter it. Israeli assessments thus saw Hamas as a government-like authority rather than

a resistance organization. This was compounded by the fact that the early warning systems Israel had installed on the border with the Gaza Strip failed, and the barrier Israel had built there collapsed.

The war on Gaza exposed flaws in Israel's security doctrine, most significantly its neglect of its infantry units in general and the reserve system in particular.⁶ For years, its doctrine had come to focus on the development of "qualitative" combat units, such as the air force and high-tech army units, in line with the priorities dictated by its threat map. This prioritized the Iranian nuclear project and preparations to strike Iranian atomic facilities, either directly, through operations relying on various components of the Israeli air force, or indirectly, by sabotaging, disrupting and impeding the nuclear project through intelligence operations and cyber-attacks.

Israel's assault on Gaza has reaffirmed the importance of its infantry, and the reserve system in particular, which had been neglected over previous decades in favour of specialist combat units.⁷ The army suddenly discovered that it was thousands of soldiers short of its requirements for its military operations, and the question of recruiting religious Jews—the Haredim—emerged as one of "life and death" rather than simply a socio-economic issue, as it had been framed prior to the war.⁸

The 7 October attacks also changed the concept of modern war, as it fitted neither with this conception nor with the theory of past wars, but rather combined various elements. The Hamas-led operation, and Israel's subsequent assault on Gaza, showed that the country had focused heavily on the defensive aspects of its preparations for this type of warfare—namely the development of defence systems against rockets launched from Gaza.

Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the Israeli assault on Gaza reinforced the Israeli mentality of the hermetically sealed fortress. Israel is seeking to build a barrier along its eastern border with Jordan and take permanent control of the Philadelphi (Salah al-Din) Corridor, in addition to its multi-layered air defence system.

This mentality sits within the concept of the Iron Wall, which is based on the idea that military force serves the goal of subjugating the Palestinians. It fits with a common saying in Israel: "What doesn't come by force, comes by more force." Jabotinsky's concept also feeds into Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's claim, after the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, that Israel was setting out to change the strategic reality in the Middle East. Of course, in the Israeli premier's eyes, this change could only come through the use of force and demonstrating Israel's military, which alone can bring the Arabs to reach peace agreements with the country.

⁶ Guy Hazoot, *The High-Tech Army and the Cavalry Army: How Israel Forsook the Ground Forces* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publications, 2024).

⁷ Baruch Nevo & Yael Shur-Shmueli, *Is the Whole People an Army? Reserve Service in Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2020).

⁸ Shlomit Ravitsky Tur-Paz & Gordon Gabriel, "Quantity and Cost of Reserve Service in the Event that Haredim Enter Regular and Reserve Service in the IDF," *Israel Democracy Institute*, 9/4/2024, accessed on 10/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc6hdn6v>

Strategic Repercussions

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Israel's assault on Gaza have had a number of strategic repercussions for the idea of Israeli national security, which cannot be separated from domestic political transformations in Israel. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The entrenchment of the Iron Wall concept. The 7 October attacks will reinforce the notion of the Iron Wall in Israeli thought, driving an accumulation of military power in the coming years in the form of increasing government spending on national security and the construction and development of ever more fortifications along its borders and in its airspace. Israel will deploy brutal force, as its very existence and continued presence in the region require it to be stronger and more defensive. This force will take on a form not restrained by moral, legal or humanitarian procedures and considerations, as if this were a moment of rebirth for Israel, represented by the construction of a new deterrent force which could be seen as echoing the *Nakba* (the Palestinian "catastrophe" of 1948). Such a dynamic will not be satisfied with inflicting damage or defeat on Israel's adversaries, but will seek to destroy the very infrastructure of their lives and their continued existence. Israel will work aggressively to implement the concept of the Iron Wall through brute force, in order to rehabilitate its system of deterrence by employing such force in order to "manage" other fronts. This has indeed happened with its aggression against Lebanon: the use of brute force, unrestricted by moral, international or legal constraints, against a sovereign state and a member of the United Nations. Israel sees the use of force in this way as its path to restoring its system of deterrence and the status quo prior to 7 October.
2. Israeli efforts to restore the Palestinian cause to its pre-Oslo status, under Israeli occupation. This will amount to a "new occupation" of Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, rather than a re-occupation; Israel will impose its military and security control over the Gaza Strip and deepen its dominance across all areas of the West Bank, with a Palestinian local administration charged solely with managing the population's civilian affairs, under Israeli security and military authority. In so doing, Israel will try to delete whatever remains of the Oslo Agreement and the ramifications of the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, with the exception of maintaining a Palestinian administration, in order to avoid bearing its responsibilities as an occupying state towards the civilian population (in terms of providing services and so on).
3. The transformation of all areas under Israeli control into a fortress or military barracks, of Israel controls all the borders, bolstering its defence and warning systems along them. To do so, Israel will retake control of the Philadelphia Axis between Gaza and Egypt, build a separation wall along the Israel and the West Bank's eastern border with Jordan, and construct yet more internal barriers that further advance the process of dismembering Palestinian society.
4. Repairing cracks in the Iron Wall within Israel. Such measures will include developing the army reserve system, but most importantly, constructing a security system that can sustain long wars with the persistence needed to achieve their military objectives. This may inflict

human and civilian costs on Israeli society, as has been evident in the aggression against Gaza, where Israel has been fighting the longest war of its history and has abandoned its top goal of liberating Israeli hostages and prisoners, in favour of broader military and security objectives.

Conclusion

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood struck the central pillar of the Iron Wall concept, deterrence, by targeting its defenses. The attack was the toughest blow to the concept of the Iron Wall since 1948, as militants penetrated and took control of territory under Israeli sovereignty for several days, sowing confusion within the Israeli state, both in its civilian institutions and its security and military establishment.

The 7 October attacks had a profound impact on the Israeli consciousness, plummeting the country into a new "war of independence," as it was framed in Israeli discourse – or even an existential war. The latter terminology does not necessarily mean that the operation could have led to the destruction of the State of Israel, but rather that it exposed the fragility of the Iron Wall, a strategic pillar of Israel's existence as a hegemonic state in the region, with deterrent power based fundamentally on its military might. The cracking of the wall thus exposed the fragility of the Israeli state and its institutions. Therefore, the Israeli response was, to put it mildly, evocative of a second Nakba; it deployed brute force in a way that recalled the founding moment of the State of Israel in 1948.

When Israel declared that it was fighting an existential war, it did not mean that Palestinian resistance organizations, led by Hamas, were capable of destroying the State of Israel, or even aimed to do so. Rather, it meant that they had created deep fissures in the Iron Wall, which is the essence of Israel's strength and the foundation of its existence in the region.

On top of its acts of revenge and retaliation against Gaza and its people, Israel's military operations aimed to repair the Iron Wall, through the excessive and brutal use of force. It extended this use of force to the West Bank, using extreme violence against armed Palestinian brigades in the refugee camps there, attempting to fragment and disperse them, and to sear the vision of a new Nakba on the Palestinian consciousness. It also deployed this brute force in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. Military power is what guarantees Israel's position and is the key to its survival. The war currently underway is a radical return to the Iron Wall.



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