

# Athens, Sparta, and Israel

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## COMMENTARY

Athens and Sparta represented for classical thinkers distinct and opposing regimes. Democratic Athens took pride in its freedom, openness, and accomplishments in the arts and philosophy. Oligarchic Sparta was famous for its social stratification, strict military discipline, and battlefield prowess. The two ancient Greek cities were thought, not least by one another, to stand for rival and incompatible forms of life.

Therefore, the central assertion of Ari Shavit's slender and singular book, "[An Existential War: From Tragedy to Victory and Beyond](#)," unsettles. To survive in a post-Oct. 7 world in which the Islamic Republic of Iran wages a seven-front war against it, contends Shavit, Israel must combine the virtues of Athens and Sparta.

Then again, Shavit's insistence that Jerusalem must cultivate the best of Athens and Sparta is also fitting. Survival has always required Israel – amid the current "existential peril" as much as ever – to exercise simultaneously the refined virtues and the martial virtues.

The uncommon mix of the free and democratic ethic and the warrior ethic has animated Israel from the beginning. Thanks in no small part to uncommon acumen and astounding determination, Jews living in their ancestral homeland under the British mandate of Palestine in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave birth in May 1948 – as British rule expired and five Arab nations attacked – to Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and as a rights-protecting democracy. Owing in significant measure to their ingenuity and fortitude, Israelis over the last 76 years have defeated and deterred numerous Arab armies and held off a variety of terrorist organizations and non-state Islamist militias while creating a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, a vibrant culture, and a prosperous high-tech economy.

Drawing on wellsprings of resourcefulness and courage, shocked and heartbroken Israelis came together after the Oct. 7 atrocities perpetrated one year ago by Iran-backed Hamas jihadists to fight the bloodthirsty enemy, comfort the bereaved, and provide essential social services. Since then, improvisation and well-conceived and skillfully executed battle plans enabled Israel to eliminate through treacherous urban warfare Hamas' ability to govern Gaza and wage war even as the Jewish state also strives to free the hostages. Displaying creativity and discipline, Israel has since late July killed Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran; incapacitated thousands of Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters by detonating their communications devices; destroyed Hezbollah's Beirut headquarters and killed

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and many of his top commanders; substantially degraded the militia's stocks of rockets and missiles; and blown up Houthi military targets in Yemen.

A prominent Israeli journalist and author of the 2015 New York Times bestseller, "My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel," Shavit has excelled at bringing into focus not only the nation's remarkable blend of virtues but also its flaws and vulnerabilities. This enabled him to identify early the looming peril.

From the end of the Second Intifada in the mid-2000s to the social and political crisis triggered by the judicial overhaul proposed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government in January 2023, Israel enjoyed years of plenty – a robust, start-up driven economy and relative quiet. Amid the good times, Shavit warned that citizens were growing complacent even as the nation's political cohesion eroded, and Iran developed nuclear weapons and tightened its ring of jihadist militias surrounding the Jewish state.

In "Saving Israel," a pamphlet published in Hebrew in the spring of 2023, Shavit counseled that the "deep crisis" over Netanyahu's judicial overhaul "endangers the Israeli miracle" and "threatens to erase our sensational achievements and leave us homeless." He called on Israel's Zionist majority, embracing wide swathes of the left and the right, to form a new "Zionist covenant" reflecting a spirit at once "powerful and moral, nationalist and liberal, Jewish and democratic." Preserving that covenant would demand both Spartan and Athenian virtues: "Only the combination of toughness and openness will ensure that neither weakness nor zealotry will bring us to the edge of the abyss."

With "An Existential War" – an English translation is underway – Shavit carries into the domain of grand strategy the ambition to explain the harsh realities, internal as well as external, that Israel confronts and to clarify the balance of clashing strengths that the Jewish state must summon. An array of distinguished individuals has attested to Shavit's contribution to fashioning a new national security strategy for the Jewish state. They include Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who hails from the left; former Prime Minister Naftali Bennet, who belongs to the religious right; former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff and defense minister Benny Gantz (under Netanyahu); former IDF chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot (also under Netanyahu); and several distinguished retired generals. All agree: With few words, Shavit goes a long way to sketching the assumptions, principles, facts, interests, threats, strategic objectives, and tactics that, in a post-Oct. 7 world, must inform Israel's defense of its territory, people, and way of life.

Shavit begins with brute reality: Israel dwells amid daunting dangers. From its founding, the Jewish state has been "mired in a bitter, profound conflict with the powerful forces of radical Islam, Arab nationalism, and Palestinian nationalism that seek to destroy it." This makes Israel unique among the world's rights-protecting democracies: "It is a **frontier democracy**, a free society living by its sword, an advanced nation whose adversaries aspire to tear it

down” (emphasis here and throughout is in the original). Sovereign Israel’s 10 million people and 13,200 square miles of territory are dwarfed by 430 million Arabs spread across 8.64 million square miles, Iran with a population of 91.5 million and a territory of 636,000 square miles, and a 1.9 billion Muslims worldwide.

Israel’s founding fathers developed a military doctrine that enabled the nation to not merely survive but thrive while surrounded by adversaries who could be deterred but never fully defeated. Right-wing Zionist Zeev Jabotinsky espoused the construction of an “iron wall” drawing on Zionism’s “scientific-technological excellence, economic prowess, military supremacy, and moral-ideological fortitude.” Behind it, the Jewish state could build a flourishing society grounded in the rule of law and equal rights.

For operations beyond the iron wall, left-wing Zionist David Ben-Gurion, the fledgling nation’s first prime minister, devised a strategy that rested on three pillars, according to Shavit. Superior intelligence would allow Israel to mobilize quickly. Decisive victories would stop enemy armies before they could inflict damage on the Israeli homeland. And strategic deterrence would emerge from a string of major triumphs that would dishearten the enemy and reconcile it to Israel’s existence.

The success of Israel’s founding security doctrine brought about its obsolescence. Israel achieved stunning victories in the 1948-49 War of Independence and the 1967 Six Day War, and heroically turned the tide against Egypt and Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. It signed peace treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. The 1993 Oslo Accords spurred hopes of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But following Oslo’s demise and the exhaustion of the Second Intifada (2000-05), Israelis lulled themselves into believing that the conflict could be managed indefinitely. Meanwhile, the military adopted the comforting notion that Iranian proxies – particularly Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon but also Hamas in Judea and Samaria, militias in Syria and Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen – could be kept at bay by an IDF that was small, mobile, and high-tech.

Having served as prime minister from 1996 to 1999, Netanyahu returned to the prime ministership in 2009 and from there has led the country for 14 of the last 15 years. During this decade and a half, more and more talented Israelis opted for the private sector over politics and public service. And with affluence – to which Netanyahu’s free-market policies during his 2003-05 tenure as finance minister made a major contribution – Israelis increasingly indulged the spirit of tribalism. Identity – as Ashkenazi or Sephardi, religious or secular, anti-Netanyahu or pro-Netanyahu, member of the people or the elite – superseded the solidarity stemming from common Israeli citizenship.

During the Netanyahu years a complacent Israel, argues Shavit, “failed to adopt a comprehensive national strategy to grapple with the dangerous geopolitical developments engulfing the Middle East and beyond.” Iran and its proxies surrounded the Jewish state to

the south, north, and east with sophisticated drones, rockets, and missiles. The Tehran-led jihadists aimed to steadily weaken and dispirit Israel until Iran acquired nuclear weapons and fundamentally altered the rules of the game.

Hamas, which has exercised “total control” over Gaza for almost 20 years, and Hezbollah, which has maintained “almost total control” over Lebanon for at least as long, have presented the most immediate threats. Yet Israel failed to fashion an effective military or diplomatic response to either.

Israel’s state-of-the-art rocket and missile defense systems provided unprecedented protection from the terrorists’ projectiles. This great technological achievement, however, compounded Israeli complacency. At the same time and with Iranian aid, Hamas and Hezbollah steadily increased the quantity and quality of their weapons, extended their tunnel systems, embedded themselves further within their own civilian populations, and refined plans and trained for murderous surprise assaults on Israeli civilians.

Israel adopted a defensive posture. **“The new, if unarticulated, objective of Israeli policy in the last decades became the protection of a state dedicated to the good life by means of minimizing casualties and lengthening the intervals between outbreaks of hostility,”** writes Shavit. “The historical security doctrine was replaced by a reckless *modus operandi*.” The hard truth is that “In contrast to the Ben Gurion government, the Netanyahu government governed without a national strategy or a national security doctrine.”

A worthy Israeli national strategy, Shavit stresses, must forthrightly address Israel’s “existential challenge,” which consists of three threats. The first is Iran: “[F]or the first time in its history, Israel **confronts a regional power with strategic capabilities, a strategic masterplan, an imperial past, and imperial ambitions.**” The second is terrorism: The jihadists are a “fanatical adversary” conducting “**a long-term asymmetric campaign**” against a prosperous and law-abiding nation-state. By hiding and fighting from within and under its own civilian populations, the terrorists expose Israel to international obloquy because of the necessary measures it must take to defend itself. And by attacking Israel’s civilian population, the terrorists hope to exhaust and dispirit the Jewish state. The third is the combined threat: Together Iran and its jihadist proxies “strive to combine **11<sup>th</sup>-century values with 21<sup>st</sup>-century capabilities.**”

Shavit argues that “[t]he Oct. 7 catastrophe fully exposed the enfeeblement” of Israel’s strategic thinking. “While the Israeli soldier, the Israeli civilian, and Israeli society displayed awe-inspiring courage and valor” in the days and weeks following Hamas’ slaughter, rape, maiming, and kidnapping, the government “failed to formulate a comprehensive security framework, an effective diplomatic policy, and a convincing international campaign to defend its actions.” That remains true notwithstanding Israel’s remarkable post-Oct. 7 military achievements, especially of the last few weeks.

A new Israeli national security strategy, maintains Shavit, should be based on the nation's founding doctrines: "Israel must return to the principles of Zeev Jabotinsky and David Ben Gurion – and adapt them to the challenging reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century." It is necessary but not sufficient for Israel to fortify its iron wall, excel at intelligence gathering and analysis, achieve decisive victories on the enemies' territory, and deter aggression by repeated military successes. In addition, Israel must seize the initiative, placing a priority on acting preemptively not only to prevent Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons but also to diminish substantially Iran's conventionally armed proxies.

To seize the initiative, argues Shavit, Israel must undertake a variety of tasks. It must reorganize and strengthen the IDF, the Mossad, and the Shin Bet (internal security). It must continually improve cyber and AI capabilities and recommit itself to studying intensively not only its adversaries' military capabilities but also their society, culture, political ideology, and religious beliefs. It must sow division between the terrorists and the civilian populations they exploit. It must punish Iran for its proxies' aggressions. And, crucial to all these improvements and transformations, Israel must undertake large-scale political reform: "Israel cannot launch a preemptive war initiative without trustworthy leaders, sound government, a strong army – and a unified society that recognizes itself as engaged in a righteous existential struggle against its adversaries."

This ambitious new security strategy, Shavit emphasizes, will have to contend with "two calamitous scenarios": a resource-depleting and spirit-sapping war of attrition and an all-out regional war. To avert the one and prepare for the other, Israel must expand its defense industries, safeguard its partnership with the United States, draw more moderate Arab and Muslim nations into the Abraham Accords, and openly and emphatically join forces with the free world in the struggle against the authoritarian powers led by the Chinese Communist Party along with Russia and Iran.

Shavit advises Israel to postpone a final showdown with Iran for a few years. This would give the Jewish state time to reinforce its iron wall, rebuild its military, and recommit to the mix of Athenian and Spartan virtues that formed it and enabled it to prevail and prosper.

However, Iran's firing of at least 180 ballistic missiles at Israel on Oct. 1 – a second major act of war following its mid-April barrage of more than 300 hundred drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles – may throw off Shavit's preferred timetable. Although they had the potential to cause immense loss of life and extensive damage to infrastructure, Iran's ballistic missiles did little harm because Israel's extraordinary air-defense systems along with the efforts of the United States and Jordan intercepted nearly all of them. Nevertheless, Israel promises a "harsh response" to the Iranian aggression.

Whatever the coming days bring, Israel's "**decade of do-or-die**," according to Shavit, will require the nation to mobilize in multiple spheres.

Military mobilization must include significantly enlarging the armed forces, regular and reserves; expanding ground forces; strengthening offensive and defensive cyber capabilities; reforming leadership ranks; tripling ammunition stores; improving civilian readiness for attacks on the home front; and maximizing strategic independence by becoming “a **global leader in defense production.**”

Civic mobilization undergirds military mobilization. Accordingly, Israel’s educational system must “cultivate a new spirit of pioneerism.” Minority communities must do their part. The ultra-Orthodox should serve in the Home Front Command. So should young Israeli men and women who have avoided military service as well as men between the ages of 45 and 65 who have fulfilled their regular and reserve responsibilities. And Arab-Israelis – some 21% of the population – should contribute to “the nation’s defense by serving in hospitals, clinics, the medical corps, firefighting, and other non-military essential services.”

Diplomatic mobilization is crucial as well. Israel, argues Shavit, should entrench itself within the world’s freedom-bloc by devising realistic plans, consistent with Israel’s security imperatives, for rebuilding and stabilizing Gaza and improving freedom and social and economic well-being among West Bank Palestinians. It must tighten security cooperation with the United States, normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, renew partnerships with Europe, and deepen relations with India. It must become a manufacturing powerhouse of sophisticated weapons systems, both to equip its own armed forces, which will make it more self-reliant, and to contribute to the free world’s military needs, which will enhance its international stature. It must use its cyber capabilities to stir unrest among the abused populations that live under Hezbollah’s and Hamas’ theological tyrannies. And it must persuade friends and partners to join in weakening the Iranian regime through economic sanctions and the fomenting of internal dissent.

Military mobilization, civic mobilization, and diplomatic mobilization hinge on political mobilization. Afflicted by “cynicism, mediocrity, and truculence,” Israel’s politicians have weakened the nation’s cohesion, asserts Shavit. To fashion a governing coalition and constitutional order worthy of its remarkable people, Israel should hold elections at the first opportunity. While Shavit was composing his book during the first half of 2024, that meant after the northern and southern borders had been stabilized. Iran’s massive missile attack last week has changed those calculations. Given Prime Minister Netanyahu’s declaration that “[t]he regime in Iran does not understand our determination to defend ourselves and our determination to retaliate against our enemies,” there is no saying when a realistic opportunity for new elections will arise.

When Israel can safely hold elections, urges Shavit, the nation’s large Zionist majority – right and left – should form a national unity government. If war with Iran still looms, the broad coalition “should establish a narrow emergency cabinet, with a wide mandate to focus on preparing Israel.” It should also present a “‘thin’ constitution,” one covering basic government institutions and the separation of powers that can earn wide popular support and secure

Israel as a rights-protecting democracy. The national unity government should also make a priority of revitalizing the civil service and incorporating the ultra-Orthodox and Arab minorities into Israeli civic life.

Whether full-scale regional war breaks out in the short term or in the intermediate term, Israel must over the long term, Shavit concludes, renew its multifaceted founding spirit. The Jewish state must replace the “**divisiveness and grievance**” that plague its political culture with a spirit of “**mutual responsibility.**” Israel “must be steadfast and fierce, but it must never be belligerent and wild.” It must honor the laws of war even as its enemies defy them. It must remain “**an oasis of liberty**” as it battles “authoritarianism and fanaticism.” And it must prepare for war to attain peace. By combining rival but essential virtues, maintains Shavit, Israelis “will ensure that the cruel conflict in which we find ourselves does not corrupt us, and does not cause us to lose our way and our souls.”

One might take issue with any number of premises, observations, claims, judgments, and proposals that Shavit sets forth in his bold sketch of a new Israeli national security strategy. Such are the stakes, the complexities, and the contingencies that on any particular point some will decry him for going too far and others will condemn him for not going far enough. On the essential matter, though, Shavit has made a decisive case: To remain free, democratic, Jewish, and secure in the post-Oct. 7 world, Israel must surpass Athens and Sparta by blending the best in both.

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