

**Charles D. Freilich. *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2018. 496pp. Hb.: £30.49. E-book: £19.80. ISBN: 978-0-19-060293-2.**

Charles Freilich is a former Israeli deputy national security adviser, and a current senior fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center, where he specializes in Israeli national security strategy, Middle Eastern affairs and US–Middle East policy. Freilich has written extensively on the topic of Israeli national security policy-making; his previous book, *Zion's Dilemma: How Israel Makes National Security Policy*, currently serves as the authoritative English-language work on Israel's national security policy-making process.<sup>1</sup>

In *Israeli National Security*, Freilich presents the most comprehensive English-language study to date on Israeli national security policy-making. The author outlines both the historic precepts that contributed to Israel's longstanding security doctrine and proposes a new national security strategy, with a set of actionable policy recommendations in the last section. This is a meticulously researched and thoughtful study on Israel's response to the transformation of its national security environment since the 1990s. Freilich begins by laying out the pillars of Israel's 'classic' defence doctrine. The doctrine was adopted largely in response to the circumstances the new State of Israel found itself in during, and in the aftermath, of the War of Independence (1947–1949) – what the author describes as a 'strategic nightmare', in light of the new state's lack of strategic depth and its protracted conflict with its Arab neighbours. Despite the changes in Israel's geostrategic environment over the past 25 years, and the evolving nature of the security threats facing the country, the doctrine has yet to be formally updated. This is despite, as Freilich documents, several attempts to revise Israel's security concept, including a major multi-year strategic review chaired by former cabinet minister Dan Meridor, and, more recently, the 2015

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<sup>1</sup> Charles D. Freilich, *Zion's Dilemma: How Israel Makes National Security Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Strategy produced by then Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot.

According to the author, Israel faces a paradox as it approaches its eighth decade. While acknowledging that 'Israel has never been more secure and better positioned to chart its future course as a nation' – a considerable achievement which Freilich attributes partly to the success of Israel's longstanding security doctrine – Freilich argues that the country continues to face significant threats that require it 'to maintain robust conventional and strategic capabilities, both offensive and defensive.' (p. 340). The author maintains, however, that at present, Israel is more secure than it has ever been at any time in its past – and so the time is ripe to revise the country's national security doctrine.

In the second part of the book, Freilich delves into the changes in Israel's geostrategic environment over the past two decades. He draws on a series of interviews with current and former security officials, complemented by his extensive experience working within Israel's National Security Council during the second intifada. Among the changes that Freilich examines is the threat from Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, the rise of asymmetric adversaries – Hizballah and Hamas in particular – and the growing challenge Israel faces from delegitimization efforts. While each of these threats poses a challenge to national security, Freilich argues throughout the book that only the threat from Iran's nuclear programme is as a 'potentially' existential threat, whereas the others are serious, but non-existential (p. 328).

It is in the latter half of the book that Freilich's contribution is on full display. In Part III, he discusses Israel's strategic response to the transformation of its national security environment in recent decades, emphasizing the role of demographic, political and socio-economic trends, in addition to military developments. His approach is reminiscent of the broad interpretation of security offered by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. In a 1953 address to the Knesset, Ben-Gurion elucidated a broad definition of security, encompassing all aspects of Israeli life, from military preparedness to

ensuring economic independence and from the integration of immigrants to investment in education.<sup>2</sup> *Israeli National Security* makes a unique contribution to English-language studies on the transformation of Israel's national security environment through this emphasis on the role of Israel's domestic politics in national security decision-making. This is a significant contribution, particularly as most studies of Israel's security environment focus largely on military issues.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, throughout the book – and this is also one of his policy recommendations – Freilich makes the case that in updating its national security concept, Israel must preserve and strengthen domestic sources of power in addition to maintaining robust strategic capabilities (p. 340). This is why Freilich argues for socio-economic and electoral reforms to be regarded as 'high-priority national security objectives.' (pp. 340; 378–84).

Despite the changes to Israel's strategic environment since the early 1990s, the original security doctrine formulated during the late 1940s and early 1950s remains, as Freilich argues, 'the closest thing Israel has to date to a national security strategy' – even though it has never been formally adopted (pp. 6, 14). This is partly due to elements within Israeli strategic culture that compel the country's leadership to reject a formal national security strategy, unlike other countries, including the US and the UK, which routinely produce intra-governmental and public versions of their respective national security strategies. This begs the question as to why the author, a veteran of Israel's national security bureaucracy, would bother to dedicate a section of the study to providing a set of policy recommendations. Indeed, Freilich notes that in the highly politicized nature of Israel's coalition system, the country's senior leadership prefers not to be tied to a strategy, given the inherent fluctuations in the makeup of the

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<sup>2</sup> David Ben-Gurion, 'Presentation of the Government, Nov. 2–3, 1955', in Netanel Lorch, ed., *Major Knesset Debates, 1948–1981*, Vol. 3 (Lanham, MD: The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1993), pp. 843–81.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ofer Shelah, *HaOmetz LeNatzeach (The Courage to Win)* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2015) [Hebrew]; Ehud Eilam, *Israel's Military Doctrine* (London: Lexington Books, 2018); Efraim Inbar, *Israel's National Security: Issues and Challenges Since the Yom Kippur War* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008).

cabinet—nor do they wish to risk their political futures. Consequently, 'Israel's premiers have manifested a long-standing predilection to either avoid systematic policy-making processes or to limit them to narrowly focused issues' (p. 7).

*Israeli National Security* is a comprehensive study which should serve as core reading for students and practitioners of Israeli security affairs, and Middle East security policy more broadly.

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