Article

National, Community, and Individual Resilience – From Uncertainty to Unity Amid War: The Israeli Case – Operation Iron Swords, 2023

Abstract: *The resilience and stability of human society, be it of the individuals or the communities comprising it, depend on several key variables. At times, these variables are influenced by internal forces, such as the economy, social cohesion, and mutual responsibility; at times, they are influenced by the perceptions of the individual – as a product of one's upbringing, education, and values; and at times, these variables are affected by external forces, such as existential threats facing the nation. The latter will be at the heart of this essay, which will delve into Israel as a nation on the brink of social collapse over the government's push for a radical judicial overhaul. What seemed like an unbridgeable internal divide, however, was immediately sidelined on October 7, 2023, when the Hamas terrorist group launched an unprecedented onslaught against Israel, with a massacre that left 1,400 people dead. That bloody morning, which plunged Israel into war, saw all sectors of Israeli society band together immediately, rising like the legendary phoenix to stand united against those seeking its destruction and proving Israel's national resilience as a force to be reckoned with. This shift – from distress to determination – will be the main focus of this analysis. Is there such a thing as "inherent" national resilience? Looking at the British people during World War II, when they came together to keep calm and carry on during the attacks by Nazi Germany, the answer could be "Yes," as the national strength exhibited seemed ingrained in the British character. Still, other nations seem to lack this type of "backbone" and must therefore develop "acquired resilience" via defense training, active and passive defenses, vaccinations, etc. Does this claim stand the test of time and reality as it appears to manifest in the Israeli case? This essay will focus on resilience as a basic and central concept around which the circles of society move. It will present the variables influencing the nature of resilience and their effect on the quantity, quality, and reality of resilience, in any given country at the level of an individual, the community, and the nation. To analyze these concepts, I will present the Israeli case of 2023 to examine the fundamental question of whether an external threat is key to a nation's unity, social cohesion, and the formation of a strong and*

Avi **BITZUR**

Home Front Defense and Security Program
& Gerontology Studies Program,
Beit Berl Academic College,
Head of study programs, Israel;
ORCID: 0009-0004-6031-5642;
avibitzur@gmail.com

stable communal, individual, and national core able to ward off such threats. I will also delve into the question of how, in the absence of inherent resilience – as in the British case – can a society, such as the Israeli society, preserve the cohesion and resilience it has acquired amid a military conflict.

1. Introduction

The concept of resilience is central in the lives of individuals within society, groups, and communities, and is a central issue in the life of a nation in the sense of its national fortitude. The factors that produce sustainable resilience among individuals, society, or on a national level are numerous, and inevitably create various definitions of this concept and result in different approaches by which this concept and its importance in everyday life and states of emergency are understood, perceived, and analyzed.

Understanding this concept and analyzing it against the backdrop of various crises and disastrous events – for example, resilience is a central issue in understanding how different systems maintain their functional continuity in crisis – and in learning and preparing contingencies that can help these systems resume their functionality in the wake of a crisis.

This article will deal with the situation of Israel, which in late 2023 was plunged into a state of individual and collective trauma. The events leading to this crisis saw the country teeter on the brink of disintegration, brought about by a prolonged major political crisis and the government's attempt to introduce a radical judicial overhaul, sparking mass social protests nationwide. Grappling with a growing internal strife that threatened to tear its social fabric apart, on the morning of October 7, Israel awoke to the worst attack in its history, when the Hamas terrorist group launched an unprecedented onslaught against Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip, massacring 1,400 people.

The brutal attack dealt a massive blow to Israelis' sense of security and their faith in their leadership and crippled their personal, communal, social, and national sense of resilience (Elran et al., 2023). This notwithstanding, at the time of this essay's writing – some four months after the war erupted – Israel transcended into a state of recovery, rebuilding its strength and capabilities.the. phenomenon of "rally around the flag" become crucial. This essay analyzes Israeli society's transformation from a state of deep crisis and virtual dissolution to social solidarity, cohesion, and a resolute reaction to the military and civil challenges.

The review will begin by presenting the issue of resilience in its various definitions and will examine theoretical ways of dealing with crises that undermine individual, communal, and national resilience. This will be followed by an outline of the situation in which Israel found itself and how it was able to rise above it and restore its stability, cohesion, and national strength, and an analysis of the main reasons allowing the country to begin its recovery from the severe crisis at hand. This analysis will be offered against the backdrop of the currently ongoing Operation Iron Swords – the military conflict that erupted over the events of October 7, 2023, and which entails fighting on Israel's southern and northern frontiers.

This essay examines the characteristics of Israeli resilience based on the various definitions of the term and how these crises can be leveraged into amelioration on various levels; all while presenting recommendations and insights necessary to create the appropriate tools for Israel's

recovery, and to understand what mechanisms should be put in place to help it emerge from the crisis.

2. Individual, Communal and National Resilience – Definitions

Israel's situation at the onset of one of the most tumultuous years since its inception can best be described by the following: "When I'm drowning, I don't need you to describe the water, its color, clarity or depth, as I can feel it around my neck. I have but one request: Don't stop describing the land you see on the horizon" (Versano-Eisman and Hamiel, 2017: 84).

2.1. Individual and Communal Resilience

When we attempt to define the stability and resilience of individuals or communities, the distinction between the psycho–cognitive approach and the militaristic–empirical approach stands out: the former deals with individuals and their mindset, and the latter is more practical on the community and state levels and is referred to as "national resilience." Both approaches, however, agree that the resource of individual or national resilience is a central asset in managing and organizing the lives of individuals, society, and nations during and after crises or an overwhelming trauma, as experienced by Israeli society on October 2023 (Lewis, 2013). This quotation was the common truth on 2013 and again at 2023 in the case of Israel.

An individual's resilience is defined as the process and outcome of successfully adapting to challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands that do not match that individual's expectations (Hamiel, 2017). This resilience is tested when the individual encounters acute stress or crisis, which manifests in the following ways: a physical or mental threat to an individual; an event that alters the integrity of an individual's world as they know it; events that challenge the individual's world perceptions or personal principles; sudden events for which there is no time to prepare; prolonged crisis, and a crisis that causes physiological, psychological, cognitive and behavioral changes (Hamiel, 2017).

What happens to an individual experiencing acute stress? Possible scenarios include a breakdown of the principle of continuous function – that is when the order of planned action is disrupted; one's mind and body shift into survival mode without the ability to act; and the individual feels isolated and cut off from the environment – even within a group; the proper comprehension of reality is compromise and, as a result, the individual feels powerless and sometimes also guilty for what happened, and, lastly, the individual's fight–or–flight response could become compromised, becoming overactive or underactive (Harvey, 2007).

The individual's coping ability depends on several factors, such as hope, a history of crises experienced by the individual or the community, the actions taken to emerge from the state of crisis-related stagnation, the individual's past ability to recover, the individual's perception and attitude toward the threat, and the means of communication between the individual experiencing the crisis and others around them as means of restoring resilience (Versano-Eisman and Hamiel, 2017: 84).

To partially summarize the hundreds of possible definitions of the concept of mental resilience in the most basic form, it is best to say that resilience is the ability of a person, a group, or a nation to deal with life's crises through internal resources such as courage, tenaci-

ty, adaptability, and perseverance, in correlation with external resources such as support systems and various hobbies. Resilience is based on our ability to produce narratives that will give meaning to the crisis in which we find ourselves and as such, it is not an innate quality, but rather an ability that develops over time – one that must constantly be reinforced, advanced, and improved.

2.2. National Resilience

If we examine the definitions for communal, social, or national resilience, we find that they deal with the variables we detailed about individual resilience and that they expand on the influence of external resources, such as the economy, military, history, and national morale. A more expansive definition sees both communal and national resilience as an instrument comprising the mental, social, and systemic resources that help the party affected by trauma to deal with stressful situations, by feeling that they possess the ability to weather the experience and become stronger going forward.

Combining all of these coping resources provides the tools by which the ability to function – while reducing stress by identifying appropriate coping channels – can be exhausted. The more tools employed in the coping effort, and the more flexible they are, the easier the coping endeavor becomes (Stephen, 2022: 45).

If we widen the prism to examine the concept of national resilience, we find a clear link between the definition of individual resilience, social resilience, and national resilience. This is based on individual resilience as a convergence of forces and resources the individual has and can use to deal with short and prolonged adversity. This convergence, combined with psychosocial and/or technical information made available through sub-agents in the community and imparted coping skills, creates *communal resilience*. When a society acquires the ability to realize individual and communal resilience adaptively to overcome a crisis and maintain its national goals and vision, as set before the crisis, then it is a society that possesses solid, stable, and sustainable national resilience (Shayshon, 2023).

3. Inherent Resilience versus Acquired Resilience

National resilience has become a dominant element in any country's readiness for dealing with threats, particularly on the home front. The understanding that, in the event of an acute crisis as a result of the realization of military threats, natural disasters, or hazardous materials incidents, the civilian home front will have to serve as a bulwark vis–à–vis the crisis, is in the crux of the definition of national resilience. A country with no solidarity and consensus on how to face a threat will be unable to support its leaders as they do so, and will be unable to weather a major storm.

Modern warfare has made the civilian home front a central target for attack, giving rise to several key aspects for civilian readiness in times of war or crisis, which include the geographical aspect – how close, or far, the home front is to the crisis; the functional aspect – who makes up the civilian front and what is their contribution to the effort in times of crisis or war; the military/security aspect – what comprises civilian defense; the moral aspect – the definition of a civilian home front or threatened citizens, and how to remove them from areas under imminent threat (International Law on the Bombing of Civilians, n.d.); and the social and psy-

chological aspect of the population in connection with its desire to go to war, or with dealing with threats and crises involving war (Bitzur, 2003).

The social and psychological aspects of a society or a nation's resilience are based on national morale, steadfastness, social resilience, ability to recover, and desire to fight. On this level, the perils the civilian home front faces go beyond the threat of destruction, death, and chaos, directly targeting the civilian ability to withstand suffering and scarcity in threatening situations (Pape, 1996).

Social cohesion is a pivotal dimension of resilience as a nation will be unable to withstand hardship if it fails to confront threats and crises from within. That is, a society that lacks national morale, consensus, and solidarity will be rendered weak and could fragment (Howard, 1998).

Social resilience is based on national morale and strength, as defined by Morgenthau: "National morale and resilience are the overall decisive qualities that determine an egalitarian struggle. When a nation has tangible national resilience, the government of that nation can sustain its foreign policy in times such as war" (Morgenthau, 1954: 170).

Fred Ikle noted that if the perception of the importance of national resilience and national morale "is undermined, production may decrease, systems may become functionally ineffective, and passive and active opposition to the regime may arise" (Ikle, 1958: 87). That is, social resilience comprises, to a degree, national morale and society's ability to reel from a crisis. Society's ability to recover results from a correct balance in the allocation of national resources and the preparations made by society to withstand such threats.

Steven Rosen, for example, maintained that a determined social consensus, when grounded in national resilience, is a pivotal element that helps leaders make informed decisions. A society will be unable to withstand threats "if it does not possess psychological aspects that include its acquired resilience [components that are acquired or produced to bolster national resilience] and its inherent resilience [resources that exist in the threatened nation from the moment of its inception]" (Rosen, 1995).

The major definitions in this article will be this coming two phrases and with them I will deal in my article: Resilience is defined as the ability of a system to fight and overcome a surprising catastrophic event while maintaining functional continuity, and the ability to recover from the crisis while growing, adjusting, and eyeing new objectives. The magnitude of the catastrophic event vis–à–vis the level of resilience beforehand, social solidarity and national cohesion, and the issue of expectation and hope for a better future are very important when we seek to understand and assess the timeframe in which we can expect the system to recover from the shock – as we will learn from the Israeli case.

Resilience is of utmost importance as it impacts the individual, the community, society, and the nation on every level, making the perception of resilience central to analyzing and understanding what transpired in Israel in late 2023. The atmosphere leading up to the October attack, the ensuing war and its management – and the aftermath thereof, as it unfolds – are nothing less than a historical crossroads for Israel and its neighbors, as well as for world powers, as presented and analyzed below.

4. From Turmoil to Recovery: Israel in Operation Iron Swords

Israel of 2023 seemed to be steadily on its way to maintaining its successful state: a government was formed with a solid coalition majority [64 seats in parliament out of 120] after six election campaigns in three years, the economy and the tech and industry sector were at their

peak, and the country's political, social, economic, security and international futures appeared bright. That outlook was soon mired by strife, as hawkish elements within the government launched what the liberal camp in Israel saw as an assault on the judiciary, trying to curb its authorities in a way that would give the executive branch – the government – what many deemed unreasonable power. Mass protests erupted nationwide, intensifying throughout the summer, but luckily, devoid of casualties. The government's insistence to push through its radical judicial overhaul soon splintered Israeli society, pitting the Right and Left, secular and religious, conservative and liberal forces against each other. Israel's social fabric was rapidly unraveling, escalating into a call for refusal to serve in the military or the reserves – an inconceivable notion in the Jewish state, which practices conscription and where the reserves comprise 90% of the fighting forces – and the country seemed on the brink of chaos.

This precarious situation weakened Israel, giving rise to terrorist threats from Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as from archenemy Iran, which sponsors both. This threat manifested in full, horrific force on Saturday, October 7, 2023, when the Hamas terrorist group launched an unprecedented onslaught against Israel, invading Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip, and massacring some 1,400 people. The attack saw nearly 3,000 Hamas terrorists abuse, mutilate, and burn their victims, as well as rape hundreds of women. As Israeli forces engaged the terrorists, hundreds of them fled back into Gaza, burning entire communities to the ground and abducting over 250 Israelis – men, women, children, and the elderly.

The brutal attack stunned Israel and the world, representing the worst mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust. Israel is no stranger to harsh battles and gruesome terrorist attacks, yet the sheer number of casualties in this one attack remains inconceivable: to compare – 6,000 Israelis were killed during the 1948 War of Independence (18 months) and 2,400 were killed during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The loss of life during the single-day attack of October 7 rattled Israel to its core, threatening to irrevocably shatter its resilience.

Moreover, the catastrophic intelligence failure leading up to the attack, the military fiasco during the first day of the war, and the ensuing days of government paralysis during the mass evacuation of tens of thousands of Israelis from what has become a warzone, turned Israel from a state perceived as a regional power to a country in deep crisis. The war on the southern front was soon augmented by sporadic yet intensifying Hezbollah attacks from the north, prompting a second, mass civilian evacuation and bringing the number of displaced Israelis to over 250,000.

As the war – in its fourth month, at the time when this article is elaborated – rages on, there is no doubt that Israel has undergone an extremely traumatic event, which led to two developments that contribute to the rebuilding of ameliorated national resilience: the formation of a broad emergency coalition with opposition parties, and the full mobilization of the Israeli military on both fronts, including declaring a total war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

There are clear elements that we can recognize in the process leading to the trauma and how Israel, as a nation and a society, is trying to learn and grow from it to restore resilience and stability. The salient points highlighting the blow dealt to Israeli resilience include:

1. The stunning realization that the IDF is fallible and cannot offer hermetic protection against the threat of invasion.

2. The shattering of the concept of "my home is a fortress" and the crisis of losing the sense of personal security.

3. The ongoing uncertainty regarding the fate of those abducted and missing.

4. Sexual traumatization in light of the severe rapes, abuse, and mutilation of women by Hamas terrorists during the massacre.

5. Government incompetence and paralysis, as reflected by the failure of contingencies put into place by the National Emergency Authority, the Emergency Economy Administration, and various national evacuation plans (The National Contingency Plan for Civilian Evacuation in Wartime or Earthquakes, 2017).

6. Overexposure to media broadcasts featuring catastrophic events.

7. A loss of confidence in the national leadership.

8. Shock over the brutality of the attack, the unfolding battles, and immediate, high–intensity escalation over time.

9. The unrelenting grief and bereavement.

10. The displacement of some 250,000 Israelis due to the war (Shayshon, 2023).

As a society, Israel demonstrated surprising agility, quickly reeling and mobilizing into action. This can be explained by two prominent social models, outlined by German sociologist Georg Simmel and German–American sociologist Lewis Coser. Simmel assumed that external and internal elements can bring together individuals and groups in the threatened society even if they are polarized [as in the Israeli case], and even if their divisions have resulted in a crisis of confidence (Simmel, 1910). Challenging Parsons' conflict theory (Parsons, 1937), Coser presents the conflict situation with external groups as one that increases group awareness of the need to unite, and even as one that can bring about internal solidarity, as it marks boundaries between rival groups at home, prevents theoretical and practical stagnation, bring issues and problems to the surface, and demonstrate the need for social cohesion to fight against the external threat (Shapiro and Ben-Eliezer, 2020).

The Israeli case reflects these models: Israel experienced deep social division and its resilience and endurance suffered a massive blow, but it resumed a state of social cohesion. While the latter still needs to be completely stable it most definitely points out that Israel is well on its way to regain its national resilience.

A thorough examination of the layers of social cohesion in Israel shows that it has structural advantages that probably render it more resilient. These include "tolerable" political polarization that has yet to spark serious violence or civil war; political polarization that has yet to lead to a complete breakdown of the social fabric; the recognition that solid national unity is vital given external threats; the understanding that until all of the stated objectives of Operation Iron Swords – e.g., the safe return of all those abducted – are achieved, national unity must remain strong; a sense of shared objective prompting the Israeli society to express a desire to shoulder the burden under the auspices of a type of cooperative social contract; strong international support, especially from the United States, Britain, Germany, and others; overwhelming support by Diaspora Jewry; and the overall realization that Israel, as a nation and a society, cannot wage war under the banner of hatred and revenge over the horrific massacre and that, even in grief, it must cling to its morality, ethics, and humanity, as there is no greater display of power.

I believe that the disintegration of Israel's resilience and the way it has been regenerated are nothing short of a drama of historical proportions, which shows how important external and internal resources are as the building blocks of national resilience, especially for a country like Israel.

I believe that a nation the history of which is rooted in the memory of the Holocaust and the biblical People of Israel can and must rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the devastating events leading up to Operation Iron Swords and emerge as a stronger society and a more powerful nation.

5. Conclusion

At the time of this article's writing, the war has entered its fourth month. Preceded by political, legal, and social turmoil that threatened to unravel Israeli society and which weakened it to the point of falling prey to an unprecedented terrorist attack by Hamas, Israeli resilience now seems to be well on its way to recovery.

While for many Israelis – the survivors of the attack, victims' families, and the residents of the southern and northern frontiers – the amelioration of individual resilience is a work in progress, the confidence in the country's leadership, the absence of a sense of personal security and the still–tenuous social atmosphere remain destabilizing factors. Israel remains a traumatized country in a state of war, the social recovery of which greatly depends on military achievements, namely the safe return of all those abducted by Hamas and the return of those displaced to the northern and southern communities.

These achievements alone would restore the sense of national, social, communal, and personal resilience to the levels of October 6, 2023, and they are pivotal for the creation of any viable horizon for Israeli society: "It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future, and this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task" (Frankl, 1962: 87).

Israel must take immediate action to regain the national resilience required for its continued existence and prosperity. For history to never repeat itself, political, economic, social, and government–level organizational issues must change to create a new future for Israeli society and ensure it never again finds itself on the verge of collapsing.

This process must reignite the entire Israeli system while erasing old practices that have proven defunct: "'Those who try to put their lives back together exactly the way it was before the crisis, remain fragile. Those who accept the fragmentation and rebuild themselves, become more resilient" (Stephen, 2022: 27).

If Israel engages in the rebuilding of its public diplomacy apparatus, re-establishes security mechanisms on the Gaza and Lebanon borders, and rebuilds effective and reliable governmental service systems – in addition to retrieving those abducted into Gaza and providing the best response to the displaced residents of the south and the north – all while demonstrating solidarity, unity, and reformed political conduct it will have a better chance of restoring and even enhancing its national resilience.

Israel's ability to quickly reel back from a state of near–disintegration to that of solid continued functioning stems from the following: the rapid restoration of unity when faced with an outside threat; the display of social solidarity by forces that were hostile to each other; continued faith in some state institutions such as the military – especially the reserves – the police, and emergency relief organizations (Magen David Adom and ZAKA); the understanding that hope and optimism can – and must – prevail, especially in light of successful military maneuvers and the rapid mobilization of civil society organization; realizing the functional continuity of the economy; and last, but not least, the structural, organizational, and conceptual shifts

that rendered notions like draft–dodging by ultra–Orthodox youth or not having women serve in combat roles hollow.

These dramatic changes to the collective mindset will help Israel emerge from the ruins of October 7, 2023 – a day that will live in infamy – stronger.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author(s)

Dr. Avi BITZUR is formerly the director-general of the Ministry of Pensioners' Affairs.

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