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Israel Facing New Threats In Same Old Military Ways

Gary Rosenblatt - Editor and Publisher

In the last six months, Israel has fought and failed to win two wars, one with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the other with Hamas in Gaza.

The underlying danger, according to a still-little known but increasingly influential think tank in Tel Aviv, is that Israel's government and military have failed to adjust to a profound change, and still operate under assumptions no longer relevant.

"Closing the gap between the nature of the threat that Israel faces and the nature of Israel's response," argues a just-released analysis conducted by The Re'ut Institute, "is at present the most significant challenge facing Israel's national security."

If you haven't heard of Gidi Grinstein, the founder and president of Re'ut (Hebrew for vision), you will. Some think he may be a government leader one day, but for now he is dedicated to helping Israeli officials re-assess their positions on a variety of difficult issues.



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A laser-sharp thinker who at 36 is articulate, persuasive and driven, Grinstein coordinated the negotiating team of then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak during the Camp David and Taba talks of 1999 and 2000, and is a graduate of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and Tel Aviv University's law school.

He created Re'ut in 2004 as a Zionist think tank to support Israel by focusing on bridging the gaps between policy and reality. Unique in several ways, Re'ut is nonpartisan and offers its services to the government and its various agencies pro-bono. (Support comes from private funds, 85 percent of which are American.)

What's more, Re'ut focuses on analyzing rather than solving problems, and it has become the fastest growing and some say the most prominent policy group in Israel.

"We are building a global network of research," Grinstein told me during a recent visit to New York, where Re'ut will open an office this month. The Tel Aviv office has grown to 17 full-time employees, and will have 28 next year, he said. The average age of the staff is 29.

"We're dealing with issues that don't reach the public debate," Grinstein said. "We're not an advocacy group. We're a service provider to the government. We don't provide the answers, we frame the questions," he explained, with the goal of helping the government identify and abandon old paradigms and re-focus its thinking. And the approach seems to be working.

"They are very influential and highly respected," said Ido Aharoni, spokesman to Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who noted that his and virtually every other key ministry in the government has utilized Re'ut's services.

"Their help is not in the content but in the process," he said. "They don't tell you what to think, they tell you how to think."

Aharoni, who in his last post headed the press office of the Israeli Consulate in New York, praised the "alerts" posted by Re'ut on its Web site, identifying current policy crises and offering concise, practical analyses. (www.reut-institute.org)

The most pressing issue of the day where Re'ut can be helpful, Grinstein believes, is in identifying what he calls a new existential threat to Israel — in addition to Iran's potential nuclear bomb.

Acts of terror, staged from southern Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, are

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not just a “bothersome tactical threat which principally demands a localized military response,” according to a Re’ut report.

Rather, the terror is coming from what Re’ut calls the Resistance Network — a new kind of enemy made up of states (primarily Iran), organizations (like Hezbollah, Hamas and groups linked with al Qaeda) and individuals committed to the destruction of Israel either militarily or via a one-state solution, where Arabs would outnumber Jews in the state and dismantle its Jewish component.

But Israel has not adjusted, the report says. Even after the war with Hezbollah last summer, Jerusalem continues to react militarily and geographically (with separate units responding to violence in the north, the south and the West Bank), without a consistent political policy and relying almost exclusively on the United States as an ally.

The Re’ut analysis asserts that such thinking is dangerously outdated, and fails to perceive of the enemy as ideologically and militarily coordinated, an enemy whose goal is not the end of Israeli occupation or the creation of a Palestinian state but rather of a “Palestinian/Arab/Islamist state in place of Israel.”

Jerusalem needs to step back and see the problem as not just a military one but a political one, requiring Israel to “build strong regional alliances” with more moderate Arab states, rely less on the U.S. (since America’s influence in the region is declining), and challenge the Resistance Network by driving a wedge between it and the interests of the states in region. For example, Israel could agree to transfer more funds to the Palestinian Authority if it accepted the Oslo Accords.

The goal is to prevent a slide toward a one-state solution, which is more likely to come about as long as there is a diplomatic vacuum.

This is but one, however significant, Re’ut analysis of a major foreign policy crisis, and one hopes that Israelis in positions of power will not only study the arguments but act on them as well.

As Aharoni of the Foreign Ministry noted about Re’ut, “their alerts sometimes save the day.” n

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