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The Collectivist Core of Israel's Social Fabric

*Threats to the Israeli national spirit
may be the most dangerous of all*



FRIDAY, April 12: Iran is expected at any time to launch an unprecedented direct attack on Israel, perhaps including ballistic missiles armed with three-quarter-kiloton warheads, accurate to 30 feet. Israel's main broadsheet features a picture of a blue sky with wispy clouds

and the headline "Forecast: Showers." The next evening, IDF spokesman Daniel Harari laconically announces that "a short while ago, Iran launched missiles from its territory toward the State of Israel" and that the public should be ready to go to a safe room or bomb shelter in case an air-raid siren went off.

Immediately, the memes start flying. A TV screenshot with the estimated arrival times of various projectiles is annotated with what you could cook while you were waiting: Ballistic missiles, 18 minutes:

omelet sandwich. Cruise missiles, 2 hours: *matbucha* (a Moroccan meze dish). Suicide drones, 9 hours: cholent.

In the end, Iran fired more than 300 projectiles at Israel. What enabled Israelis to face such a massive missile attack with such equanimity? Partly, it's their confidence in the IDF's air defenses. But it is also an example of the social resilience that Israelis take for granted, but that would be hard to imagine anywhere else in the West.



The most basic explanation for Israeli resilience is the Nietzschean maxim that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. But resilience, especially if it's to be durable, doesn't spontaneously emerge — it must be developed. Just as a boxer must constantly train, not just fight, Israelis are constantly developing their resiliency muscles from a young age.

Gibush, a hard-to-translate Hebrew word for bonding into groups, is second nature to Israelis. In schools, if there is not enough *gibush* in a class, the teacher, parents, and students consider it a crisis. Cultivating *gibush* — the sense of solidarity of the group — is not a sidebar to the course content. It is a central value of education.

Young Israelis build additional social muscles in the culture of ubiquitous youth movements, such as Bnei Akiva and Tzofim (Israel Scouts). Unlike school, scouting can focus entirely on building the values that hold society together. This is where Israelis start learning that the way to get things done is in groups. Adults are pushed into the background as much as possible. In Israel, it is not just legal but desirable for a pair of 16-year-olds to take 40 10-year-olds out on a hike. The Israeli formula is to challenge young people with individual responsibility for collective goals.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once asked the British historian Paul

Johnson for his core insight from writing his acclaimed *A History of the Jews*. “There have been, in the course of history, societies that emphasized the individual, like the secular West today,” Johnson told Sacks. Others “placed weight on the collective.” Judaism, Johnson continued, “managed the delicate balance between both, giving equal weight to individual rights and collective responsibility.” This “constituted one of the Jewish people’s greatest achievements.” Israel has done more than inherit the Jewish balancing act that Johnson described and that was so essential to surviving two millennia of exile. It has doubled down on it.

The ticket into elite Western society is an elite university. Admission departments are the arbiters of a one-against-all struggle based on individual academic achievement. Better grades in high school lead to a better university, a better career, and higher social status. The pressure on teenagers is intense, and the stakes, selectivity, and cost of getting into a prestigious university only seem to be rising.

Israeli society operates on much the opposite framework. Rather than applying to university after high school, Israelis apply to elite army units. The animating principle is service rather than material success. The criteria for acceptance into the top units are partly individual, but more crucially based on the ability to work in teams and the willingness to sacrifice for a larger purpose, rather than personal advancement.

A service-based society helps to instill meaning, community, and belonging. As we all come to learn sooner or later, acts of service are the surest path to feeling a sense of those values. Service is, by definition, oriented outward, toward something larger than oneself.

On October 7, Israelis experienced the total failure of their political and, more shockingly, military institutions to protect them from swarms of terrorists in pickup trucks. At the same time, the institutional vacuum was filled by an awesome display of societal power.

Israelis immediately organized themselves into potent organizations that took over many of the functions of government, from providing soldiers with bulletproof vests to supporting hundreds of thousands of evacuees with food, clothing, and mental-health support.

As the war against Hamas in Gaza and against Hezbollah on the northern border wore on, and the aspects of the prewar protests against the government returned, Israel seemed to be facing the worst of all worlds: fighting a war with no clear end or victory, growing internal strife, increasing international isolation, and the threat of an even more devastating war with Hezbollah. Israeli resilience, like a fight-or-flight reflex, has always emerged in times of crisis. But its resilience is built on solidarity, which seems to be waning at the moment it is needed most.

Israelis can handle wars. What they cannot abide — what will sap their morale and hope for the future — is deepening societal division. The resonant qualities of the Israeli national soul — meaning, community, belonging — will wither in a deeply divided country. Societal resilience relies upon a bedrock of trust in institutions and fellow citizens. For Israel’s rugged spirit to continue, political divisions and social inflammation must be resolved.



Idan Amedi is one of Israel’s most popular singers and a star of the hit Netflix television series *Fauda*. On January 8, an explosion killed the soldiers on either side of him and injured him so seriously that he could at first not be identified by medics. Upon his release from the hospital, he said to the assembled cameras, “The Israeli people are the strongest in the world. When we are united we are invincible.”

Israelis know they are all in the same boat, a fact that the slaughter of October 7 demonstrated vividly. They also have a visceral

desire to be united, especially after tasting the heights of solidarity while fighting shoulder-to-shoulder on the battlefield and supporting one another so effectively on the home front. They know, as Amedi expressed, that their real power is not in their weaponry, but in their commitment to “the shared home” — a phrase that appeared on signs throughout the protests over judicial reform.

The silver lining of the tragic and dangerous period since early 2023 is that a broad swathe of centrist Israelis came to realize how much they were willing to fight for two things they had previously taken for granted: first, the pillars of their democracy, and then the physical existence of the country.

The massive pogrom that took place on Israeli territory has created a rhyming moment in history. It is not 1948, far from it. But this generation suddenly feels as if it is not the fourth, but the first — a new founding generation. Political change is the first step to restoring trust in the governing and security establishment, but that is just a beginning. As Tal Becker, the lawyer who recently spearheaded Israel’s defense at the International Court of Justice, remarked on the *Call Me Back* podcast, “We have to remember that we have the state we need in order to build the society that we want.” *