

C. Ess and F. Sudweeks (eds). *Proceedings Cultural Attitudes Towards Communication and Technology '98*, University of Sydney, Australia, 189-192.

NATIONAL SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY ON THE INTERNET IN ISRAEL

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A recent parliamentary committee meeting devoted to "Freedom of Expression and the Internet", began with a short demonstration in which Internet sites describing the Order of Battle of the Israeli Airforce, Nuclear weapons¹, as well as some pornography were reviewed. Members of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) were shocked and astounded -- not by the pornography, but rather by the fact that "classified" information was readily available on the Internet. The discussion quickly turned from dealing with freedom of expression, to how to prevent information of this kind from being readily available on the Internet. This incident serves to underscore the inherent conflict of values in Israeli society -- the primacy of national security, which subordinates almost every other aspect of democracy in Israel, versus the ideal of liberal democracy focusing on individual rights -- chief among these being freedom of expression. These conflicting values have been brought to the surface in recent years due to the incredible growth of Internet use by the general public in Israel.

Yitzhak Rabin, the late Prime Minister of Israel and a former military leader, once described Israel's security situation as one of "dormant war" erupting every few years into active conflict.² Others have described Israel as a garrison state, surrounded by enemies. In order to understand the relationship between national security and democracy in Israel, one must view the social, political and cultural context. In the founding Zionist ethos of Israel, the tension between national security and democracy hardly existed as an issue.³ When matters of

¹The sites reviewed were: <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/9305/> (The Air Force) and <http://www.envirolink.org/issues/nuketesting/hew/Israel/index.html>; http://www.janes.com/geopol/sentinel/geosent_focus10.html (Nuclear Weapons). These sites are based solely on information garnered from open sources generally available to the public.

²See Y. Rabin's lecture in *Academy in Memory of Yitzhak Sadeh*, Sept. 21, 1967 (Hebrew). Quoted in Horowitz and Lissak *Trouble in Utopia*, p. 195.

³Cohen, A.: 1993, Nuclear Weapons and Israeli Democracy, in A. Yaniv (ed.) *National Security and Democracy in Israel*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, p. 203

national security are at stake, democratic considerations are seen as a luxury. The security of the state is strongly tied to the state's survival, and as such, the cause of security must override all other causes, including democracy, but more specifically, freedom of expression. This attitude towards national security in Israel has been adopted and internalized not only by the government and government institutions and agencies, but since Israel's founding in 1948, by the public as well.

Partial roots of the attitudes towards the primacy of national security may be found in the policy of *mamlachtiut* or statism, as developed by David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister. Briefly stated, the official policy of statism developed by Ben Gurion was composed of three elements: The necessity for the state framework to provide universal services; the exclusiveness of state activity in certain areas of public life; and the depolitization of state structures to render them impartial to political party considerations. This statism was crucial in forming the framework for a common political culture among new immigrant from varying backgrounds. A crucial component of Ben Gurion's statism was the Israeli Army (IDF), whose role, beyond that of defense, was to fulfill the function of a melting pot in society, serving as a crucible in shaping the national identity of Israel's Jewish citizens. Thus, all men and women, from the age of 18 are expected to serve three and two years respectively, with an additional month of reserve duty for men, every year until the age of 55. The mandatory service in the IDF, and the subsequent reserve duty tend to strengthen respect for issues of national security in Israel.

A number of incidents have taken place over the past few years which has served to test the feasibility of protecting national security from the eyes of the public as well as Israel's potential enemies. The turning point was the Gulf War. While the Pentagon enforced severe restrictions on the press in the theater of operation, the foreign press in Israel used satellite and facsimiles to broadcast reports. The height of this was when missiles were falling on Tel Aviv, and the reporter for CNN was broadcasting the exact point of impact. The Iraqis could not have hoped for better information regarding their ability to launch missiles at civilian targets. In a conversation with a reservist who served in the military censor's office during the war, the military censor admitted to being powerless in the face of communication technologies such as satellite and facsimile broadcast, and could only hope to do his best at keeping up appearances. At the same time, beyond the public eye, the IRC channels and Usenet groups on the Internet were providing an additional source of information to the public within Israel and beyond, much in the way of Ham Radio operators did in the US in the '40 and '50s. Computer users seized technology and made it work, providing accurate, uncensored reports of the effects of the Gulf War (see Frederick, 1992).

The second incident concerned a posting to various Usenet news groups dealing with Israel, providing the name and address of the newly appointed head of the General Security Services (GSS). Until then, the names of the heads of Israel's intelligence organizations were known to a relatively few people, and were considered state secrets. On March 14, 1995, the following post appeared on a number of news groups on Usenet:

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Message-ID: <123311Z14031995@anon.penet.fi>
Path:
NetVision.net.il!aristo.tau.ac.il!barilvm!dearn!nntp.gmd.de!stern.fokus.gmd.de!ceres.fokus.gmd.de!zib-berlin.de!Germany.EU.net!EU.net!news.eunet.fi!anon.penet.fi
Newsgroups: soc.culture.israel,talk.politics.mideast
From: an217892@anon.penet.fi
X-Anonymously-To: soc.culture.israel,talk.politics.mideast
Organization: Anonymous contact service
Reply-To: an217892@anon.penet.fi
Date: Tue, 14 Mar 1995 12:27:34 UTC
Subject: Shabak4
Lines: 12
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Mazel tov to the new head of Shabak Carmi Gilon. You can send letters of congratulations to:

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Carmi Gilon
6 Hagefen Street
Mevaseret Zion
Jerusalem
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This Usenet posting managed to make headlines in all the daily papers in Israel, but following orders of the military censor, the name and address was blacked out. At the same time, anybody with Internet access could view the posting. A number of months later, the name of Carmi Gilon was officially made public, as was the name of the head of the Mossad. Since this incident, every intended appointment to the heads of both security services are now made public, allowing public debate and criticism prior to the appointments.

The third incident occurred a few months ago, following the attempted assassination of Khaled Mishal by the Mossad in Jordan. While the story was breaking elsewhere, the prime minister requested that the press refrain from reporting on the matter, claiming that such reports would endanger the lives of Mossad agents still in Jordan. The press went along with the voluntary censorship until details of the botched operation appeared on the Sunday Times of London web site. The dailies then felt free to deal with details of the case, leading to a public debate which almost caused the resignation of the prime minister, and which eventually led to the appointment of a new head of the Mossad.

⁴**SHABAK** is the Hebrew Acronym for the GSS.

These incidents serve to underscore the tensions between national security and democracy in Israel, a tension that today is related more to the political and cultural concepts of democracy than to any real threat to the country's existence. Israel as a society is struggling with traditionalism, authoritarianism and nationalism, each appearing as components within the country's unique political culture. This paper will deal with the political and cultural aspects of democracy and national security in Israel vis a vis computer mediated communication, focusing on where these issues conflict with prevailing cultural attitudes towards freedom of expression and freedom of information. Prospects for cultural and political change as a result of widespread Internet use in Israel will also be discussed.