Decisiveness in Domestic Public Policies

Case Studies of Israeli Gas Field Development and COVID-19 Pandemic Response

Artur Skorek

ABSTRACT: Constructivists in the field of International Relations assume that states not only seek to ensure their physical security but also try to secure their identities by maintaining durable behavioral patterns in their relations with other actors. The dominant identity of the Israeli state is associated with policies characterized by resoluteness and decisiveness. This article argues that this state identity also manifests itself in the domestic sphere and presents case studies of two such manifestations. The first pertains to the development of Israeli offshore gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean while the second deals with the country’s COVID-19 pandemic containment strategy. The two cases are similar in the decisive and extraordinary character of the measures that the government attempted to use. At the same time, in the first case study this attempt was mostly unsuccessful and only in the second case the decisive stance was effectively implemented.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, decisiveness, gas policy, identity, Israel

Israel is often presented as a country that responds swiftly and resolutely to the challenges it faces without paying much heed to outside critiques and pressures. Most of the empirical work on this issue focuses on the international dimension, mainly the Arab-Israeli conflict and military efforts to preserve Israel’s security. This article aims to broaden the discussion by arguing that Israel’s decisiveness in international relations is just
one expression of a broader state identity that also manifests itself in the country’s domestic public policies. Similar characteristics and patterns of behavior are evident in both foreign and domestic policies. By providing two case studies in which Israel’s identity in the international arena spills over into the domestic one, the article contributes to ongoing discussions of identity in international relations (IR).

Theories of state identity in IR have been elaborated mostly by constructivists who treat it as something socially constructed through interaction with other actors. Identities shape states’ interests and thus also their actions (Wendt 1999). States’ identities manifest themselves in behavioral patterns that can be empirically examined. According to this view, states attempt to sustain these patterns, which provide them with ontological security. The analysis in this article is premised on the assumption that the dominant identity of the Israeli state is associated with policies characterized by swift, decisive, and resolute responses to perceived threats or challenges (for brevity, I use the terms ‘decisiveness’ or ‘decisive approach’ to capture these interrelated categories) (see Freilich 2018: 23–28; Maoz 2009: 3–17, 499–502; Ṭal 2000: 39–50). I maintain, with the constructivists, that Israel’s identity was constructed through (often violent) interactions between Israel and the Arab states. As some have argued, the predominance of decisiveness in Israel’s identity may stem from the subordination of the country’s foreign policy to security considerations (Rubin 2022). At the same time, it should be noted that decisiveness has not been evident in all aspects of Israel’s foreign policy. As Zeev Maoz (2009) contends, it was absent from peace diplomacy, where Israel was most often reluctant to accept daring compromises (40).

Although IR scholars naturally focus on the international dimension, there is much evidence to support the notion that the political establishments and state structures affected by state identities also have ramifications for domestic policies. Moreover, any clear-cut differentiation between these two spheres tends to be oversimplified and arbitrary. Pandemic restrictions, for example, generally belong to the sphere of domestic health policy. At the same time, they include measures like closing the borders to foreigners. In the case of gas policy, separating the foreign from the domestic is even more difficult. Nevertheless, it seems that Israel’s decisive approach to foreign policy matters is not manifested as often in the domestic arena. For example, in fields of religion-state relations (Neubauer-Shani and Shamir 2021) and environmental policy (Karolina Zielińska’s article in this issue), Israel’s approach is the opposite of decisive.

But although Israel’s domestic policies tend to be less decisive than its foreign policy, the impact of an overarching state identity characterized by decisiveness is still observable in the domestic realm. The article will
analyze two case studies related to spheres of the economy and health. The first deals with the formulation of a legal framework for the development of Israeli gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. The second involves the measures taken by the Israeli government to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, Israeli policies were characterized by decisiveness not only in their international dimensions but in their domestic ones as well. I conclude by exploring the question of whether Israel’s actions in these two cases can be understood as part of a broader behavioral pattern of decisiveness, one in which the state responds to challenges in a swift and determined manner.

The next two sections provide a brief overview of the existing literature and an account of the methods utilized in this article. I then present the case studies of Israel’s gas field development policy and its COVID-19 pandemic response. The final two sections discuss that case study data and draw out general conclusions.

**Literature Review**

*Israel’s Identity and Policy Style*

The literature about Israel’s identity is mostly devoted to the identity of the nation and approaches it from a sociopsychological perspective, identifying how the social characteristics of Israeli Jews influence the country’s policies, especially its foreign policy. Dov Waxman (2006) underscores the growing significance of the Jewish component of Israeli identity starting in the mid-1960s and its impact on policy toward the West Bank and Gaza. More recently, Neta Oren (2019) describes the two-way relationship between the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel’s national identity, describing how the latter has come to center on a view of Israel as ‘a villa in the jungle’ and the belief that ‘the whole world is against us’.

Similarly, there are works that follow different iterations of the concept of policy style—distinct procedures for making and implementing policies that stem from different sociocultural circumstances (Richardson 2013: 1–14). Itzhak Glanoor (2011) and Nissim Cohen (2016) offer analyses of the administrative culture of the Israeli civil service. The former claims that it is characterized by secretiveness and territoriality while the latter emphasizes its non-governability and bureaucratic centralization. More relevant to the concept of the state’s identity, some scholars have analyzed the sociocultural milieu in which high-echelon decision-makers, or the Israeli-Jewish nation more broadly, is embedded. Yoram Peri (2006: 213–232) writes about a ‘security culture’ shared by many civilian politicians and
military officers that is dominated by the *Machtpolitik* paradigm: a strong conviction that conflicts are zero-sum games and can be resolved only by the use of force (see also Barak and Sheffer 2006). Yehezkel Dror (2011) develops the concept of ‘statecraft culture’ mainly in the context of Israeli policy toward the Arab states and non-state actors. Widely shared by the Israeli elite, it is marked by ‘intelligent simplicity’ (simplistic pragmatism), the predominance of security agencies, and maximalist policy goals.

Scholars have also probed the impact of trauma on Israeli Jews and Israel’s national identity and foreign policy. Some focus on the impact of the Holocaust (see, for example, Wistrich 1997), while others write more broadly about a form of cultural trauma that evokes existential anxiety among Jewish Israelis and translates into foreign policy overreactions and disregard for diplomatic protocol (Yair 2014; Yair and Odom-Weiss 2014). The idea that existential insecurity is the crucial factor shaping Israeli foreign policy has been developed by Zeev Maoz (2009: 3–17, 499–502), Israel Tal (2000: 39–50), and Charles Freilich (2018: 23–28). Uriel Abulof (2015) expands on this framework, exploring its different cultural, historical, political, and security manifestations and effects (he offers the term ‘existential hypochondriac’ [137] to describe Israeli identity in this context). Amir Lupovici’s work (2016) presents Israel as a ‘deterrer’ in foreign policy matters, a category that includes characteristics like ‘resoluteness’ but that is too narrow to encapsulate the domestic case studies included in this article because ‘deterrence’ is not applicable to a pandemic or energy challenges.

**Israel’s Gas Policy and COVID-19 Response: Political Culture Dimensions**

Some scholarship on Israel’s energy and pandemic policies utilizes the concept of securitization and, similar to the identity framework of this article, underscores the importance of non-material factors in shaping public policies. Lupovici (2014) observes that security narratives in Israeli public debate are widespread. Moshe Maor (2021) deals more generally with ‘policy overreactions’, contending, in the context of Israel’s pandemic response, that overreactions are more likely when decision-makers seek to ensure their reelection “by pandering to voters’ opinions” or “overreacting to voters’ interests” (191). Elai Rettig (2021) tackles the topic of policymakers framing energy issues as existential threats. He focuses on the impact of securitization on energy cooperation between Israel and other countries and on the communication techniques used to justify Israeli energy policies to foreign and domestic audiences. Similarly, Itay Fischhendler (2018) and colleagues (Fischhendler and Nathan 2014; van Wijk and Fischhendler 2017) write about the public debate in Israel over gas field development,
with an emphasis on the communication techniques used to advance political goals. The narratives used in public debates to advance political goals were also discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Uriel Abulof and Shirley Le Penne discuss what they characterize as the fearmongering campaign behind the pandemic response (Migdal et al. 2021: 19–25). Yagil Levy (2022) sees the reaction to the pandemic as a securitizing move and underscores the leading role of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the implementation of anti-COVID measures and in framing the public as a ‘security threat’ (‘enemizing people’).

When it comes to the securitization of Israel’s COVID-19 response—something one might argue was justified given the potential number of victims—the decisiveness of the state’s behavior went beyond the role of the military in tackling the issue. This article provides a broader picture of the situation, in which a number of different decision-making and implementing agencies of the state undertook efforts characterized by decisiveness. Additionally, it attempts to broaden the debate in both empirical and theoretical scope. First, it focuses on the actual actions of state bodies, thereby enriching a literature that mainly deals with internal political rivalries and the use of securitization narratives by policymakers to achieve their goals. Second, this article frames the state’s behavior as a manifestation of its identity as a decisive actor. Finally, it contributes to general discussions of identity by providing case studies in which a state identity that developed in the international arena spills over into the domestic one.

**Method**

This article takes a state-centered approach. Although it does not negate connections between national ethos and the state, it focuses on state actions without analyzing the narratives or ‘stories’ behind those actions, the national character and history of Israeli Jews, or the psychology of the decision-makers. In the case of the COVID-19 response, an analysis of the actions taken by Israeli state agencies is complemented by a statistical analysis of data related to the state’s health policies.

It needs to be added that it is easier to define decisiveness in the military sphere than in the civil one. It is not obvious what constitutes, for example, a decisive action concerning gas field development. I address this problem by tracing how certain state actions go beyond ‘normal politics’, especially when they forgo established procedures in order to hasten the achievement of a particular set of goals. Consequently, the analysis concentrates on actions that are taken in violation of normal decision-making protocols when those actions aim to quickly resolve a problem and the
resolution has broad public consequences. Compared to definitions taken from the military sphere, this definition of decisiveness is easier to utilize in the case of the gas policy.

By any definition, Israel’s COVID-19 response was surely ‘decisive’. The actions taken by the state were quick, remote from ‘normal politics’, and had far-reaching consequences. At the same time, one might argue that such decisive measures in fact represent a ‘normal’ reaction to an extraordinary emergency situation like the recent pandemic. To better discern the influence of the identity factor and confirm the ‘decisiveness’ of the Israeli response, I compare the Israeli case with the responses of other states that found themselves in similar or worse situations during the pandemic and that share the similar democratic values (the rule of the law, individual freedom). In other words, the main theoretical and methodological tools used in this article are a definition of decisiveness predicated on differentiation from ‘normal’ politics and, in the case of the COVID-19 response, a set of international comparisons.

**Israeli Gas Fields Development**

For most of Israel’s history, its economy was largely reliant on the importation of fossil fuels (and, for over a decade, on their extraction from the occupied Sinai Peninsula). In the last two decades, Israel’s energy outlook has changed dramatically with new natural gas discoveries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)² off Israel’s Mediterranean coast, including the gas fields Noa North, Mari-B, Dolphin, Tanin, Karish, Dalit, and most importantly Leviathan and Tamar (Even and Eran 2014: 189–190). According to a recent BP report (2021), at the end of 2020 Israel had proven natural gas reserves of 0.6 trillion cubic meters (tcm), or just 0.3 percent of the global total. Israel’s government estimates were higher (1 tcm), but not substantially. Israeli gas discoveries have not significantly changed global outlooks, but they have deeply transformed the country’s domestic energy market. The new deposits are crucial for Israel’s energy security and independence and a significant source of state revenue. Electricity production increasingly relies on gas and the vast majority of it now comes from reservoirs located in the Israeli EEZ. With the exception of the transportation sector, which is still mostly dependent on oil, Israel’s economy now has a secure source of energy for the foreseeable future (Bolotin 2020).

As one can imagine, the discovery of substantial gas reserves of crucial economic and political significance stimulated a broad public debate in Israel about their extraction and future use. Using narratives of geostrategic and economic urgency, the Israeli government introduced
measures that would allow extraction to commence immediately while foregoing some of the state’s power to oversee the process. Decisive, far-reaching policies were also proposed with respect to the regulation of future gas exports. To some extent, the institutional structure of the Israeli state was friendly to this approach. The process of policy formulation and implementation in Israel is centralized and streamlined. Although Israeli governments are always a coalition of many parties with divergent agendas, strategic decisions are made by small, informal groups of ministers sometimes called ‘kitchen cabinets’ (Dror 2011: 7; Freilich 2018: 382). Furthermore, the long premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu strengthened the role of prime minister in the cabinet. This was particularly evident during the decision-making process concerning the development of the gas fields as Netanyahu became both Foreign Affairs Minister (2012–13, 2015–2019) and Minister of the Economy (2015–2016). Netanyahu sought and secured the latter post specifically to advance his position in the gas debate (E. Cohen 2018). What is more, the role of the Knesset was sidelined (Tsinovoi 2019: 223–227). Parliamentary debate on gas policy was limited to public hearings before expert committees that had only advisory functions (Ashwarya 2019: 72; Shaffer 2016: 337–343).

The first instance of the decisive approach, justified and reinforced by narratives of urgency, occurred very early in the debate about the new gas discoveries. In 2009, the government assigned responsibility for preparing a development plan for the Tamar gas field to the US company Noble Energy, citing a lack of expertise in Israel’s public bodies and the necessity of acting quickly to safeguard gas supplies (Israeli State Comptroller 2013: 269–270). The situation was especially problematic as Noble Energy was tasked with creating the legal framework that would regulate its own future business activity (developing the Tamar gas field and extracting its resources). That process was halted in 2010 when the Supreme Court ruled the government’s decision illegal. In the Court’s view, the government was not permitted to withdraw from its own planning prerogatives (van Wijk and Fischhendler 2017: 476–477). While the legal safeguards represented by the Court proved effective in this instance, it is clear that the government was inclined to act swiftly with an unconventional and highly consequential approach that violated the law. We cannot be sure of the actual motives behind the government’s approach, but its representatives cited the need to develop and profit from the gas field as soon as possible. Nevertheless, had it not been challenged by the Court, the decision would likely have hurt the public interest insofar as the latter is not typically prioritized by the private sector.

Another instance of decisive policymaking likewise involved steps aimed at privileging private energy companies, including Noble Energy.
In 2011, Israel’s Antitrust Authority (IAA 2012) found that both Noble Energy and the Delek Group had violated antitrust law by creating a de facto cartel or monopoly in the upstream gas sector. The two companies dominated Israeli gas field development and controlled both of Israel’s major gas fields (Leviathan and Tamar) as well as some of the minor ones (Karish, Tanin, Dalit). This effectively meant that, after the fields became operational, the two companies would control the vast majority of Israel’s gas supply, a position that would allow them to shape prices on the Israeli energy market. The IAA initiated legal proceedings to break the monopoly, but the Israeli government once again invoked an argument of urgency, characterizing the delays brought about by the IAA’s intervention as a threat to energy security. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also contended that the two companies had already invested in Israel’s natural gas sector and, in order for the country secure future capital from the private sector, the companies would need to see returns on their investments. (In addition, the government may have been particularly adamant in support of Noble Energy because it was a US company.) After a long legal struggle and public debate, both companies were forced to sell some of their stakes in the gas fields (Ashwarya 2019: 98–102). The new framework did not fully address the IAA’s concerns and the government managed to neutralize a potential veto from the agency by using a clause that empowers the Minister of Energy to “exempt a restrictive practice from the provisions of the Antitrust Law on grounds of foreign policy and security considerations” (Israeli Supreme Court 2016). The whole process was streamlined by the decision to transfer the energy portfolio to the prime minister, a move that came after a stand-off between Netanyahu and Energy Minister Arieh Deri, who had refused to bypass the antitrust regulations.

A third attempt to take decisive, far-reaching action that went beyond the framework of ‘regular’ policy related to gas exports. Israel has always based its policies on the notion of self-reliance and limited trust in foreign partners (Maoz 2009: 7–9), a posture that has been continuously sustained by a sense of existential threat coming especially from Middle Eastern actors that questioned the state’s legitimacy (Petrelli 2018). The goal of energy independence can be seen as part of this broader approach. Not having any significant energy resources for decades made Israel especially sensitive to the issue of secure supplies. These concerns were subsequently reinforced and substantiated by two events. Both Iran and Egypt proved to be unreliable energy suppliers when they cut energy exports to Israel for political reasons (Iran cut oil supplies in 1979, Egypt cut gas supplies in 2012). Following Israel’s gas discoveries, it became clear that Israel would now be able to satisfy its own demand for gas from domestic sources while still producing a considerable surplus for export. Yet the dominance of the
‘self-reliance’ mentality triggered a debate about banning the sale of gas to any other state.

Proponents of this far-reaching measure (experts, members of Knesset, non-governmental organizations) deemed it a guarantee of Israel’s future energy security. They contended that actual gas reserves and future domestic demand may differ from current estimates and clear priority should be given to long-term energy independence (especially in the case of electricity generation). Additionally, they maintained that gas trade with foreign partners always creates a mutual dependency that should be avoided. Concerns about the unpredictable nature of partners like Egypt were raised in this context (Fischhendler 2018: 935–942). Ultimately, a decisive approach to this problem was not taken. The Tzemach Committee proposed earmarking about half of the total gas output for the national economy. Under considerable public pressure, the government decided to further limit the export of gas, raising this cap to around 60 percent. This was considered sufficient to meet domestic demand for almost three decades (Boersma and Sachs 2015: 11–13). Still, the decision was far from an all-encompassing ban on gas exports and opened the way for selling gas to Jordan and Egypt. Energy companies have lobbied to lower the quota earmarked for the national economy but have yet to succeed.

Yet another attempt to take decisive action soon followed. Some actors claimed that gas exports should be used as leverage to facilitate better relations with neighbors like Jordan and Egypt. Prime Minister Netanyahu presented neighboring governments as unstable and argued that economic hardship and energy crises could radicalize their populations with negative effects for Arab-Israeli relations. Swiftly commencing gas exports to those countries was presented as a solution to this problem. The argument was strengthened by its sense of urgency: if Israel did not act quickly, it risked Egypt turning to Iran, which was supposedly poised to reenter international gas markets soon (Rettig 2016: 63). But the call for urgent action was not successful. Both the IAA and the Supreme Court blocked swift decisions and the gas only started to flow many years after the beginning of the public debate about Israel’s Mediterranean gas discoveries (to Jordan in 2017 and Egypt in 2020).

The final episode in the gas policy case study constitutes perhaps the most blatant attempt to break legal norms and the rules of the ‘normal’ policymaking process with decisive action. After the Supreme Court rejected Delek’s bid to prepare a development plan for the Tamar field, the government and energy companies entered negotiations over the framework for development and marketing of gas. To streamline the process and win the support of the private sector, the government formally pledged (in chapter 10 of the final agreement) not to change the agreed-upon legal framework
for ten years. This regulatory stability clause bound the government in areas such as taxation, restrictive trade practices, and export caps (Israeli Supreme Court 2016). The Supreme Court ruled this clause null and void, contending that in a democratic system, elected governments must retain their ability to react to changing circumstances and cannot compel future governments not to act. The Court argued that the ten-year obligation was especially onerous in its potential to constrain future governments that may represent different political agendas (Ashwarya 2019: 78–80, 88–107).

As discussed above, the gas discoveries in Israel’s EEZ stimulated a robust public debate on the different aspects of natural gas development and marketing. It would obviously not be accurate to unequivocally describe all of the above-mentioned policymaking episodes as embodying a ‘resolute’ and ‘far-reaching’ (i.e., decisive) approach. At the same time, when we consider the number of instances in which the government’s inclination to act urgently was impeded by the judiciary or administrative bodies, it becomes clear that the debate over Israel’s gas reserves included many attempts to take decisive, extraordinary, swift action. The actors behind these attempts were mainly the government (especially the prime minister), private companies, and associated NGOs and experts. All of them were obstructed to some extent, resulting in the postponement of gas field extraction and exports (especially in the case of the Leviathan field). The actors responsible for this preventative action included primarily the Supreme Court, Israel’s anti-monopoly agency, and environmental organizations.

**Israel’s COVID-19 Pandemic Response**

Israel’s pandemic response was quick, rather rigorous, and relatively successful. Despite that fact, COVID-19 has taken the lives of over 11,000 Israelis (World Health Organization n.d.). This article does not aim to assess the (absolute) effectiveness of Israel’s pandemic response, nor to make claims about the Israeli authorities’ over- or underreaction in the face of the health emergency. It instead traces the decisive actions taken in response to the pandemic, regardless of whether those measures were justified by extraordinary circumstances. Our interest is simply to determine if the behavior of the Israeli state diverged from other developed states acting under similar circumstances, in which case the objective realities of the pandemic situation alone would be insufficient to explain Israel’s behavior.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the number of infections in Israel was not particularly high and COVID-related mortality was especially low (Levy 2022: 106), a situation that persisted through June 2020 (Migdal
et al. 2021: 1). Nonetheless, Israel adopted strong pandemic restrictions relatively early on. Analyzing data collected by the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Halem et al. n.d.), one can compare different states’ responses to the pandemic. The “Containment and Health Index” is a composite measure of twelve indicators: school closures, workplace closures, cancellation of public events, restrictions on public gatherings, closures of public transport, stay-at-home requirements, public information campaigns, restrictions on internal movements, international travel controls, testing policy, the extent of contact tracing, requirements to wear face coverings, and policies around vaccine rollout. Since speed is a key aspect of ‘decisiveness’ as defined above, the first weeks of emergency measures taken by state agencies are most relevant in assessing the decisiveness of Israel’s pandemic response.

From March to May 2020, Israel introduced restrictions that were tighter than those in countries like the United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom, where COVID-19 had already caused tens of thousands of deaths. This is especially striking given the relatively small death toll in Israel at the time: fewer than 300 Israelis had died from COVID-19 prior to June 2020. For a short period in April 2020, Israel’s restriction index even surpassed that of Italy, the first developed country to experience the pandemic. As early as 2 February, Israel started placing travelers returning from China under a fourteen-day quarantine, and the list of countries gradually broadened until quarantine was applied to all returnees on 9 March (Maor et al. 2020: 447). Three days later, all schools and universities were closed. On 20 March, the government shut down non-essential businesses; enacted strict mobility, gathering, and workforce restrictions that limited the number of employees in all workplaces to 30 percent in both the public and private sector; and tightened the workforce limit to 15 percent in the private sector in the first half of April (OECD n.d.). On 24 March, the first lockdown was instituted, closing restaurants, malls, cultural institutions, and other public facilities (Cohen-Almagor 2021: 9).

This quick and strong response was justified by an appeal to urgency. Prime Minister Netanyahu attempted to exert tight control over the decision-making process, explaining “the need to act fast and decisively by circumventing bureaucratic procedures” (Murciano 2020: 4). Netanyahu assigned responsibility for managing the crisis to the National Security Council (NSC). The head of that body, Meir Ben Shabbat, argued that the NSC is capable of taking “quick decisions on the go” (Levy 2022: 113).

To a greater extent than the gas field development initiatives, Israel’s COVID-19 response utilized the existing legal framework for national emergencies. Israel has been in a continuous state of emergency since its foundation, which has allowed the government to issue emergency
regulations. Additionally, a regulation inherited from the British Mandate era grants the Health Minister wide authority to take sanitary measures to contain infectious diseases. Already in March, the prime minister announced that emergency regulations would be employed to tackle the epidemic, enabling the government to impose restrictions and side-lining the role of parliament. Due to legal uncertainties, the government also introduced a new law focused specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic (Albin et al. 2021). On 23 July, the law, entitled “Special Powers to Combat the Novel Coronavirus (Temporary Order),” was enacted, granting the government extensive legislative powers to contain the spread of the virus (Israeli State Comptroller 2021). The law was replaced by parliament in January 2022.

Using these legal tools, the government introduced a set of relatively rigorous restrictions. Initially, large gatherings were banned, and citizens were advised on proper hand hygiene and social distancing. However, matters progressed swiftly and, due to deficiencies of the healthcare, priority was soon given to strict lockdowns. Gatherings of over ten people were prohibited (Waitzberg et al. 2020: 2), schools were closed entirely, and individuals “were restricted to moving no more than 100 meters from their dwelling place (except for essential purchases of food and medicines), and all ‘non-essential’ enterprises were shut down, with no more than 15 percent of the workforce functioning. Further policy measures included a Passover holiday lockdown (April 8 to April 15) that prohibited intercity travel and family gatherings for celebrations” (Maor 2020 et al.: 450). Movement between many cities was forbidden for three days starting from 7 April. On 8 and 9 April, people were prohibited from leaving home, even to buy food. In order to enforce these measures, the police set up roadblocks on major routes between cities (Waitzberg et al. 2020: 3). Another strict measure was quarantining cities and towns with high infection rates. Due to the social characteristics of the Haredim, their greater level of distrust toward state authorities, and problems with communication, the virus spread especially fast in this community. The government sealed off Bnei Brak starting on 2 April. A strict lockdown was enforced by the army until 20 April. This was followed by similar treatment of other communities with high infection rates, such as Haredi neighborhoods in Jerusalem (Hamanaka 2021: 679–680). “The army was called in to collaborate with the police in evacuating the elderly and families that agreed to do so, enforcing the quarantine of cities and neighborhoods, and distributing food and essential provisions to residents” (Waitzberg et al. 2020: 3).

In many countries, the military was used to assist in the pandemic response. But in no other democracy was the military tasked with responsibilities as broad and specific as in the case of the IDF.
The Home Front Command of the IDF coordinated the information that local governments disseminated. It opened a 24/7 public call center, drive-in testing stations, and COVID-19 hospitals. It was also engaged in managing and facilitating the use of hotels for COVID-19 patients. Troops distributed food and medicine and provided other assistance to the elderly, Haredi, and Arab populations under lockdown. Thousands of soldiers were deployed to “implement restrictions in civilian areas by conducting patrols, isolating and securing areas, and blocking traffic routes” (Levy 2022: 109). Apart from involvement in policing and the logistics of lockdown implementation, the IDF was also tasked with more sophisticated tasks. The Epidemiological Investigations Task Force was formed to break the chain of infections. The Military Intelligence Directorate operated the Corona National Information and Knowledge Centre to monitor the spread of the virus and the development of medical research and health policies in other countries. Unit 81, usually responsible for military technology, was tasked with developing new medical equipment. Signal intelligence Unit 8200, which specializes in cyber-warfare, developed a digital system for managing the pandemic. Other intelligence and commando units were mobilized to streamline the testing process (Levy 2022: 110).

The army also monitored social media to identify planned prohibited gatherings—something that drew criticism as it resembled the methods used to fight terrorism (Levy 2022: 111). This approach was even more evident in the case of the General Security Service (GSS, or the Shabak), which in late March was tasked with monitoring waves of infections. The Israeli secret service employed a surveillance system that tracked the cellphones of potentially infected residents. The data was obtained from cellphone providers so all mobile devices using cellular networks in Israel and the Palestinian Territories were potentially subject to monitoring. The Shabak was authorized to collect, process, and use citizens’ personal data to determine who had come into close contact with a COVID-positive patient and ask them to quarantine at home for fourteen days. Called simply ‘the tool’, it was presented as a ‘magic bullet’ solution that had been tested during counterterrorism operations. Cellphone tracing was not unique to Israel, but in other Western democracies it was conducted through digital contact tracing apps voluntarily installed by citizens. In the case of ‘the tool’, surveillance was conducted by the secret service and did not require the smartphone user’s consent or even awareness (Cohen-Almagor and Haber in this issue; Gekker and Ben-David 2021: 150; Keshet 2020: 3). After a Supreme Court ruling, some limitations were placed on the government’s use of the secret service to manage the pandemic. Nevertheless, the ruling did not affect the core of the surveillance program, which arguably constitutes a significant and disproportionate infringement on
the privacy of hundreds of thousands of people. This is especially important as similar measures were not employed by any other democratic state (Cohen-Almagor and Haber in this issue).

Decisive action was also taken with regard to testing and vaccination campaigns. Israel very quickly expanded its testing capacity by, among other measures, setting up several 24/7 drive-through testing stations. The number of tests administered relative to the country’s population was among the highest in the OECD. When the number of test kits was deemed inadequate, the country’s foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad, was employed to obtain the medical equipment abroad (Maor 2020 et al.: 451). Israel’s vaccination campaign was also quite unique. It was one of the first countries to begin vaccinating its citizens and subsequently became a pioneer when it came to offering third and fourth doses.

Israel’s COVID-19 vaccination program, officially called Give a Shoulder, started on 20 December 2020, but preparations had begun months earlier. Israel contracted for the purchase and delivery of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines even before clinical trials had concluded. This enabled the government to start its vaccination campaign just days after the vaccine was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration. By the end of the year, it was administering over 150 thousand vaccine doses a day. Israel has experience with and infrastructure for implementing rapid responses to national emergencies, including those that require cooperation with the healthcare system (insurance agencies, hospitals, emergency care providers, and so forth). High levels of readiness characterized both public institutions (including the military) and citizens. Key to success was the rapid mobilization of special government funding for vaccine purchase and distribution. Prime Minister Netanyahu was personally involved in the negotiations with different vaccine providers to secure an excess supply of vaccines, not knowing in advance which one would be approved first. The financial details of these agreements are not known, but the Israeli government probably spent more per vaccine dose than other governments (Rosen et al. 2021: 2–6). What was also unique to the Israeli case was an agreement with Pfizer that involved Israel providing the US company with aggregate, real-world epidemiological data on the population’s response to the inoculations (Migdal et al. 2021). Similarly exceptional was the transfer of the personal data of unvaccinated individuals from sick funds to municipal authorities and the imposition of quotas on the number of Israeli citizens eligible to enter the country (Levy 2022: 119).

Another swift and exceptional step was taken in February 2021 by the Ministry of Health, which authorized the use of an off-label vaccine for adolescents aged twelve to fifteen years who had underlying health conditions or who shared a household with a severely immunocompromised
person (Stein et al. 2022). Similarly, beginning in January 2022, the government authorized a fourth dose of the vaccine for seniors over sixty, healthcare workers, and immunocompromised people, even before a medical advisory panel recommended doing so and ahead of any other nation.

As other scholars have observed (Migdal et al. 2021: 10–15), Israel’s decisive policy measures were complemented by a communication strategy. Data on the pandemic was manipulated in order to justify a predetermined set of policies and presented as indisputable fact without any public debate. Combined with an urgency narrative, this was the most common communication technique employed to justify the government’s decisive actions.

As in the gas development case study, there were attempts to curb the government’s activities, but they were more limited in scope or less successful. Probably the two most important challenges to the government’s actions related to electronic surveillance and limitations on the right to protest. There were several attempts to strike down use of the GSS’s ‘tool’ tracking system in epidemiological investigations. The Supreme Court accepted the surveillance in principle while also instituting some restrictions. It decided that any solution required parliamentary authorization and that tracking could not be forced upon journalists. After a year of operation, in March 2021, use of the tracking system was significantly restricted by another court’s decision. Six months later, yet another court ruling approved the use of ‘the tool’ to monitor the spread of the Omicron variant, but the program was finally suspended due to its ineffectiveness (Cohen-Almagor and Haber in this issue).

Another effort to curb restrictive policies was more successful. On 4 April 2021, the Supreme Court addressed six different petitions concerning the government’s epidemic restrictions. The Court upheld the Law on Special Powers to Combat the Novel Coronavirus in general, but ruled that limitations on the right to protest were disproportionate. Though the regulation in question—restricting the right to protest to an area within 1,000 meters of the demonstrator’s place of residence—had already been lifted at the time of the ruling, the Court’s decision was designed to guide state officials in the future. In two other decisions, the Supreme Court suspended the transfer of personal data on unvaccinated individuals to municipal authorities and struck down quotas on the number of Israeli nationals eligible to enter the country (Shany 2021).

As Moshe Maor and colleagues have pointed out (2020: 453–454), sometimes the Israeli government’s response was, for political reasons, characterized by underreaction, as in the case of not quarantining Israelis returning from the United States until 9 March. This, however, was the exception rather than a general characteristic of the Israeli state response to the pandemic.
Discussion

In this article, I have characterized Israel as a state whose identity is associated with decisiveness: strong and quick responses to perceived threats. Analyzing two case studies from the domestic public policy sphere—the development of Mediterranean gas fields and the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic—the article has focused on the way that identity has manifested itself in the actions of government agencies. Obviously, in both cases, the reasons for Israel’s policies were diverse and complex, and there is no way to precisely assess relative importance of the different factors at play. At the same time, the analyses presented above suggest that the state’s identity was at least partly responsible for the actions taken.

In the case of the gas policy, the role of identity can be deduced from the urgency narrative presented in the public sphere itself and even more so from the fact that they proved to be mostly unfounded. The government’s attempt to move swiftly on gas fields development was unsuccessful; the planning process had taken years and been arduous. Yet the grim scenarios presented in the public debate did not materialize. Egypt and Jordan did not pivot from Israel to Iran, and no energy crisis unfolded in Israel. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel’s economy maintained stable and robust economic growth even though there was a spike in energy prices after the Supreme Court intervened in the gas field development process in 2010 (van Wijk and Fischhendler 2017: 477). Prospects for the availability and affordability of energy in the future are also good: supplies for the domestic economy are secure and gas exports are increasing. Pinpointing the influence of the identity factor in the case of Israel’s pandemic policy is more difficult, as the decisive actions were actually taken. But as mentioned earlier, countries with significantly greater numbers of infections and deaths at even earlier points in the pandemic took far less decisive action than Israel. This indicates that the response of Israel’s government to the COVID-19 emergency can be interpreted as another example of the generally decisive behavioral patterns and not just a natural reaction to the extraordinary situation.

It is also interesting to note that the proclivity for decisiveness was not limited to the government alone. The debate over blocking gas exports proved that there were many actors in the public sphere who treat a decisive approach as natural. Sometimes calls for decisive action contradicted one another (for example, calls to export gas versus calls to block gas export), which also suggests that the inclination toward this kind of approach is a general tendency in the public sphere. What is more, decisive actions seem to garner acceptance from the public. Certainly, many of the Netanyahu government’s decisions were criticized, but those criticisms
did not seem to significantly influence support for the government. After initial ‘rallying round the flag’ and a sharp increase of trust in the prime minister at the beginning of the anti-COVID campaign (57.4 percent in April 2020), trust dropped quickly in July 2020, returning to pre-pandemic rates (29.5 percent) (Hamanaka 2021: 676). Giving priority to strategic considerations is part of the public culture of Israel. Of course, some policymakers may have an interest in advocating decisiveness under certain circumstances. However, what seems more important is a general proclivity for such an approach. While decisive action is not always adopted in the end (as in the gas policy case), doing so is made easier due to the state’s identity as reflected in public agencies’ recurrent attempts to take decisive actions and the public’s favorable attitude to them.

It seems that the first case study (gas policy) is an example of internal division within the state, with two coalitions advocating opposing policies. The government comprised the core of the first coalition, while the Supreme Court and regular bodies comprised the second. In this sense, some of the state’s institutions do not possess an identity associated with decisiveness to the same extent the government does. It also seems to confirm Menachem Mautner’s (2011) suggestion that the Supreme Court is one of the cornerstones of liberal culture in Israel. The second coalition’s limited affinity for the decisive approach may stem from its weaker links to the ‘security network’ as defined by Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer (2006). In the second case study (COVID-19 response), the conflict was not as pronounced. Certainly, there was opposition to some of the government’s actions from the media, and more broadly from civil society, but it did not lead to any considerable weakening of the state’s decisive approach.

**Conclusion**

This analysis has focused on actual public policies as expressions of the state’s identity, but it also allows us to make some preliminary remarks about the structural traits that reinforce state identity. Decades of the decisive approach in domestic and foreign policy have likely shaped the legal, institutional, and social characteristics of Israel in a way that facilitates its persistence. From a long-term perspective, these structural traits propel future decisiveness, creating a positive feedback loop.

On the institutional level, we can point to Israel’s well-developed, extensive security structures. Israel’s defense budget constitutes 5 percent of its GDP, placing it among the top ten countries in the world on this metric and substantially surpassing any other Western country (IISS 2022: 9). Israel’s security doctrine has always been based on the notion that a
decisive strike will swiftly destroy the potential of the enemy, and the IDF’s engagement in non-military matters may transplant this approach to the civilian sphere. At the same time, channeling money, manpower, and innovation into military and intelligence activities limits resources for other sectors. Gil Murciano describes how this affected the COVID-19 emergency response. He points to the weakness of crisis capacities in Israel’s civilian healthcare system. Budget cuts have curtailed the ability of bodies like the National Emergency Authority and the Centre for Disease Control to manage major national crises and made it easier for well-funded and effective security structures to fill the gap (Murciano 2020: 4).

The structural traits of the legal system include the above-mentioned emergency law. It has been intact since the creation of Israel and allows the government to bypass the Knesset and impose special regulations for security reasons. Israel’s so-called Basic Laws, which are supposed to have quasi-constitutional status, are in fact not deeply entrenched (Skorek 2021: 11), making it easier to legislate new emergency regulations like the ‘COVID-19 law’ (Levy 2022: 118–119). Another structural trait relates to Israeli society’s disposition to accept or even expect a decisive approach. For example, in a survey from November 2020, 65 percent of Israelis expressed support for the IDF managing the COVID-19 crisis (Murciano 2020). More broadly, Matan Shapiro and Nurit Bird-David (2017: 650) write about ‘routinergency’—the constant preparedness of Israeli society for an emergency, which involves treating the home front as a military front even during times of relative calm.

These traits and similar manifestations of the decisive approach in both Israeli foreign policy and the two domestic policies described in this article suggest that this type of identity may also help explain other actions taken by Israel. This explanatory framework is broader than categories that have been proposed previously (e.g., the ‘deterrer’ identity). It also moves the focus of analysis from a securitization perspective, which centers on the narratives deployed in public debate, to the behavioral patterns of the state.

As mentioned earlier, some Israeli policies have been characterized by restraint or non-decisiveness (peace negotiations, state-religion relations, and environmental policy, for example). It would be interesting to compare these cases to each another and to decisive cases in order to identify the common denominators that underlie them. Additional research might also explore the relative effectiveness of the two approaches. Some scholars have criticized Israeli decisiveness as ineffective (Maoz 2009). At the same time, it is hard to overlook the many successes of Israel’s decisive approach. Attempting to identify the conditions under which the decisive approach is effective in different public policy domains is another research
path that may prove fruitful. Finally, an international comparative analysis of decisive approaches adopted by different states (and their conditions of emergence and effectiveness) could potentially deepen insights into the Israeli case.

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ARTUR SKOREK is Chair of the European Association of Israel Studies and Adjunct Professor at the Institute of the Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University in Krakow (UJ). He is a political scientist specializing in Israel and international relations. He holds PhD in international relations and an MA in international relations and religion studies from UJ. His research spans the areas of security in the Middle East, the political system of Israel, and religion and politics. He is the author of two books on the Israeli political system and thirty academic papers (selected works: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Artur_Skorek). E-mail: arturskorek1@gmail.com

NOTES

1. This thesis has gained ground even among structural realists, as the emergence of neo-classical realism demonstrates.
2. An EEZ is a maritime zone existing outside a state’s sovereign territory in which that state exercises jurisdiction over both living and nonliving resources (such as natural gas deposits). EEZ boundaries between Israel and Cyprus and Israel and Lebanon were agreed to in 2010 and 2022, respectively.
3. This debate took place amid negotiations over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the ‘Iran nuclear deal’), which included the issue of lifting sanctions on energy trade with Iran.
4. Interestingly, despite much being said about Israel being an ‘energy island’ and its difficult situation on the international energy market, the country has never experienced a significant shortage of energy supplies.
5. Interactions between two to four competing coalitions that include actors from different sectors are theorized by Paul A. Sabatier and Christopher Weible (2007). They describe these coalitions as actors from a variety of institutions who share a set of policy beliefs. This approach seems very apt for
studying the domestic dimension of the IR concept of ontological dissonance or the state’s clashing identities. From this perspective, the competing beliefs of the coalitions would constitute a basis for the dissonance manifested in the actual policies of the state.

REFERENCES


