



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Why Israel Slept

The War in Gaza and the Search for Security

BY AMOS YADLIN AND UDI EVENTAL November 21, 2023

AMOS YADLIN is a retired Major General in the Israeli Air Force and served as the head of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate from 2006 to 2010. He is Founder and President of MIND Israel, a consulting firm.

UDI EVENTAL is a retired Colonel in the Israel Defense Forces and a Senior Adviser at MIND Israel.

In a barbaric surprise attack launched by Hamas on October 7, more Jews were slaughtered than on any day since the Holocaust. Thousands of elite Hamas militants from the Gaza Strip infiltrated small communities and cities in southern Israel, where they proceeded to commit sadistic, repulsive crimes against humanity, filming their vile deeds and boasting about them to friends and family back home.

The assault was devastating for the Israeli people. Around 1,200 people were killed that day (the equivalent of around 42,500 Americans, adjusting for population) and some 240 were kidnapped—including young children and elderly people—and taken into Hamas's vast tunnel network beneath Gaza.

It was also devastating for the Israeli state. On that fateful day, the country's long-standing security doctrine crumbled in the face of a perfect storm; as a

consequence, its intelligence and military institutions were unable to keep citizens safe. For years, the country's political and military establishment had allowed intolerable threats to gather by seeking to maintain the status quo in the conflict with the Palestinians and to establish a modus vivendi with the de facto Hamas state in Gaza based on deterrence, aiming to extend periods of tranquility.

Israel cannot return to the status quo that existed before October 7. The state's task now is to bring all the hostages back home and to make it impossible for Hamas and other adversaries, notably the Iranian-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, to carry out further terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens or pose direct threats to their security. Simultaneously, the government and the political establishment must accept responsibility for their strategic errors. They should prioritize national security interests above political survival and work to foster unity among Israelis, preparing them for the demanding times and challenges that lie ahead. And once the danger posed by Hamas has been eliminated, Israel must renew the process of promoting stable security and political arrangements with the Palestinians.

A necessary paradigm shift is now underway. But a paradigm can shift in many different directions. For the sake of Israel's future, this one must push the country's defense institutions and security strategy back toward certain basic principles from which they have strayed in recent years.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Israel's national security doctrine was initially crafted in the mid-twentieth century under the country's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. Over the decades, it has been updated to include four main pillars: deterrence, early warning, defense, and decisive victory.

Deterrence is an intricate art. Its waning can be discerned in real time, yet its definitive breakdown becomes evident only in retrospect. In this case, there were plenty of reasons why Hamas ceased to be deterred and concluded the time was right to attack. Because of Israel's overreliance on deterrence, and its tacit acceptance of a prolonged buildup of Hamas forces in Gaza (facilitated by Iranian funding and expertise), the group had achieved an unusually high level of operational readiness to carry out a major attack. It had also identified significant vulnerabilities in Israel's defenses around Gaza. Hamas may have calculated there was a good chance that a major assault and the likely Israeli response might spark violence on other fronts, including inside Israel—as was the case with an escalation of the fighting in Gaza in May 2021 that provoked clashes among Arabs and Jews in cities across Israel.

Meanwhile, the progress of talks intended to produce the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia heightened the concerns of both Hamas and Iran, which fear the further consolidation of a bloc opposed to the Islamic Republic and its allies and proxies—the so-called axis of resistance—and worry about Israel's deeper integration into the region. Hamas presumably believed a major attack would thwart this process.

Hamas was likely encouraged by the impression that Israel's internal political crisis—sparked by extensive protests against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proposal to curtail the power of the Israeli Supreme Court—had diverted attention from Gaza and significantly undermined Israel's social cohesion and steadfastness. It is worth noting that officials with Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate, the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and the minister of defense had all cautioned Netanyahu about Israel appearing historically weak in the eyes of its

adversaries. Despite these warnings conveyed in recent months through a series of letters, Netanyahu chose to disregard them.

According to Israel's security doctrine, when deterrence fails, the intelligence community assumes the vital role of providing early warning, enabling the IDF to prepare and respond effectively to the threat. But a catastrophic misconception had taken hold within the Israeli intelligence community in recent years, just as happened in the run-up to the Yom Kippur War in 1973. During that time, the intelligence community wrongly assessed that Egypt and Syria would not dare to engage in a war they could not win, failing to comprehend Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat's goal of breaking the status quo.

As a jihadi terror organization aligned with Iran and its axis of resistance, Hamas's fundamental aspiration is to inflict harm on Israel and undermine the state, with the ultimate aim of obliterating it. But Israeli intelligence and decision-makers had come to believe that Hamas's responsibilities in Gaza—where it essentially governed a de facto state of over two million Palestinians—had tempered its extremism. Hamas deceitfully encouraged this misperception in recent years, posing as a reliable actor and warning of escalation if Israel did not allow funding from Qatar to arrive in Gaza and did not permit more Gazan workers in Israel. When Israel agreed to those concessions, Hamas used the resulting money and the information gathered from Gazans allowed to work in Israel to clandestinely plot its murderous offensive.

This failure to properly comprehend Hamas's nature and its intentions dates back to the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the subsequent Hamas coup against the Palestinian Authority there. Since then, Israel had operated on the premise that a deterred and weakened Hamas was preferable to a

governance vacuum in Gaza and would allow Israel to focus on what it perceived as more critical strategic challenges, such as Iran's nuclear aspirations and Hezbollah's military buildup. Accordingly, each time a flare-up occurred in Gaza, Israel's aim was to reestablish deterrence through a limited use of force. This allowed Hamas to carry out a long-term buildup of arms and military infrastructure and to improve its operational capabilities.

When deterrence falters and early warnings fail to materialize, Israel's traditional security doctrine falls back on its third pillar: the IDF's defensive capabilities. In the past decade, the IDF has succeeded in mitigating two central threats from Gaza: rocket attacks (which Israel's Iron Dome defense system intercepts) and tunnels infiltrating Israeli territory (which were neutralized by an underground antitunnel barrier that Israel completed along the border with Gaza in 2021). But Israel failed to imagine an aboveground invasion and did not reinforce defenses around Gaza in proportion to Hamas's growing military capabilities, deviating from a key lesson learned during the Yom Kippur War: organize defense according to an adversary's capabilities and not only to its assessed intentions.

Consequently, Israeli forces in the area were outnumbered and caught off guard after the IDF reduced its troop presence around Gaza and granted leave to many soldiers during the Sukkot holiday.

The IDF had also become overly reliant on technological means of defending the border, such as cameras, advanced sensors, and remotely operated machine guns. Hamas used drones to neutralize those tools and breached the barrier with bulldozers: a combination of high-tech and low-tech means unlike anything Israel had anticipated.

The fourth pillar of Israel's security doctrine is the concept of achieving a decisive military outcome—that is, securing an uncontested victory over the

enemy by neutralizing both its military capabilities and its resolve to continue fighting. This idea has sparked extensive debate among experts and senior IDF leaders for many years about how to define “decisive outcome” and “victory” and how to apply them to conflicts with nonstate actors and terrorist groups. Israel now understands that although the jihadi ideology of Hamas may persist (as have those of the Islamic State, or ISIS, and al Qaeda), the IDF must dismantle the organization’s military capabilities.

THE GOAL IN GAZA

In the wake of Hamas’s brutal attack, Israel has come to see that it cannot coexist with a jihadi Islamist state akin to ISIS at its doorstep in Gaza. The era of intermittent cycles of fighting and cease-fires in Gaza is over. What will replace it is a continuous, protracted military campaign, one driven not by a desire for revenge but grounded in Israel’s paramount security interests and an unwavering commitment to the safe return of the hostages being held by Hamas.

Israel’s ground operation was only the first step, and the military effort will persist after the withdrawal of IDF forces from Gaza. An effective Israeli strategy demands the integration of several interrelated, parallel endeavors—military, civilian, and political—executed methodically within a structured framework, which must be continually realigned with the expectations of the Israeli public and combined with a diplomatic campaign that will secure the assistance and support that the country will need from allies and partners.

This war marks a return to the conditions outlined in the Oslo accords, which underscored Israel’s unwillingness to tolerate an armed Palestinian entity on its borders. The Israeli government is also seeking to restore the public’s trust in the IDF and other state institutions and send a signal that harming Israeli citizens will yield an unbearable cost for the country’s

adversaries and lead to their eventual destruction. The extent of the damage inflicted by Hamas on Israel demands a decisive response, even if it entails significant sacrifices. The people of Israel, rallying for reserve duty in unprecedented numbers and orchestrating volunteer organizations to aid survivors and displaced people, are acutely aware of the formidable challenge ahead and are willing to bear the necessary burdens and costs.

The realistic objectives of the current ground phase of the war are not to eliminate every Hamas operative or completely demilitarize Gaza but to degrade Hamas (and its sometime ally, Palestinian Islamic Jihad) as a fighting force, destroy its infrastructure, and eliminate the direct threat it poses to Israeli communities near Gaza. This will require the destruction of Hamas's nerve center in Gaza City, its underground facilities, and all its aboveground assets, such as military installations, headquarters, command-and-control centers, communications infrastructure, weapons manufacturing facilities, and arms depots.

In selecting targets to bomb or raid, the IDF painstakingly attempts to distinguish Hamas operatives and infrastructure from the noncombatant civilian population in accordance with the laws of war. This task is complicated by the intense density of Gaza's population within which Hamas deliberately operates and entrenches its military infrastructure and by the network of approximately 300 miles of tunnels that Hamas has built during the past 15 years, subterranean fortifications that stretch beneath every city in Gaza, often under critical civilian structures such as hospitals and schools.

To contend with the dilemma this poses, the IDF has consistently urged Gazans to evacuate the main operational zone in the northern part of Gaza and move south through secure corridors the IDF has established.

Furthermore, the IDF refrains from striking Hamas military targets in which many civilians reside, allowing them to evacuate. Despite these precautions, the war has nevertheless produced a significant number of civilian casualties, frequently as a result of Hamas's tactic of using civilians as human shields. Hamas obstructs the evacuation of civilians from operational areas and sites, and it has even targeted the secure crossings established by the IDF with mortars, intentionally impeding civilians from relocating to the southern Gaza Strip. In the face of such tactics, the IDF has gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent civilian casualties, exceeding the precautions taken by the militaries of most other democratic countries. As the war progresses, the IDF must maintain those standards, consistently communicate and demonstrate its commitment to adhere to the laws of war, and acknowledge any lapses on its own part.

To alleviate human suffering and to maintain the legitimacy of its military effort, Israel has permitted the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza through Egypt. This excludes supplies that would directly aid Hamas's war effort, however, such as fuel beyond the amount required for operations that meet humanitarian needs such as hospitals, bakeries, water desalination, and sewage pumping. It was, after all, the influx of goods and energy that Israel allowed into Gaza in recent years that enabled Hamas to build the terrorist army that attacked Israeli territory on October 7.

The ground operation will end only when Hamas ceases to function as a governing authority in Gaza and its military capabilities are significantly degraded. At that point, the campaign will transition to a new phase, likely spanning several years, at least until all the hostages have been released and have returned home safely. Targeted incursions into Gaza and airstrikes against Hamas will persist, and Israel will need to fortify a number of

strategically significant areas near the border with Gaza to create a buffer zone to enhance border defense.

Meanwhile, the IDF will need to keep an eye on the Lebanese border. Israel wants to keep Hezbollah out of the conflict but is prepared for a potential escalation on its northern border, whether due to a miscalculation or to an Iranian decision to order its proxy to open a new front in the war.

Following the conclusion of the main ground operation in Gaza, Israel will need to confront the substantial threat posed by Hezbollah's elite Radwan forces stationed along the Israeli-Lebanese border. These forces are a significant menace to Israel's northern villages and cities, which had already been evacuated at the onset of the war in Gaza. Israel must mobilize international pressure on Lebanon and Hezbollah to enforce and abide by the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which prohibits Hezbollah (and any armed forces other than UN peacekeepers and the Lebanese military) from maintaining a military presence south of the Litani River, which runs about 18 miles north of the Israeli border, with the nearest point only 2.5 miles from the border. If diplomatic efforts prove unsuccessful, Israel will stand ready to take military action, even at the risk of escalating the hostilities into a broader conflict with Hezbollah.

GAZA AND GEOPOLITICS

To win this war, Israel will require the support of partners who share its strategic interests. A number of Arab states, the United States, and European countries will play pivotal roles. Their contributions will encompass military funding and support, a global campaign to curtail Hamas's funding, humanitarian assistance for civilians and displaced persons within Gaza (and possibly beyond), reconstruction efforts, information campaigns to counter anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish propaganda worldwide,

and, most crucially, the establishment of a legitimate governing authority in Gaza.

Under the leadership of President Joe Biden, the United States has played an important role in Israel's wartime decision-making, counseling restraint to prevent escalation in the north, demanding adherence to the laws of armed conflict, and pushing Israel to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. In the weeks since October 7, the Biden administration has deployed an unprecedented level of military aid and support. Aircraft carriers and U.S. forces have been rushed to the region on an unparalleled scale, intended to deter Iran and Hezbollah from intervening in the war, to protect American forces in the area from numerous attacks by other Iranian-backed Shiite militias, and to offer a robust response to such attacks. It is noteworthy, however, that Israel maintains its fundamental principle of defending itself by itself, refraining from requesting U.S. involvement at the cost of U.S. casualties.

Many European countries have also demonstrated unwavering support for Israel, extending beyond their immediate concerns regarding the safety of the European citizens held hostage by Hamas. High-ranking European leaders such as French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak have visited Israel to express solidarity. During his visit in late October, Macron even called for the establishment of an international coalition to combat Hamas, modeled on the one that has taken on ISIS since 2014.

To secure the ongoing assistance of American and European leaders, many of whom are contending with domestic criticism of their support, Israel needs to enhance its geopolitical alignment with the bloc best represented by the United States and its NATO allies. This may involve a reevaluation of

Israel's Ukraine policy, potentially leading to increased support for Kyiv's defense against Russian aggression. Additionally, Israel should strive to further increase humanitarian aid to Gaza, make clear that it does not intend to permanently occupy the territory, consistently reaffirm its adherence to the laws of war (and acknowledge any errors in that regard), and place its mission in Gaza within the context of a broader Israeli-Palestinian political process that can advance robust security arrangements and sustain the viability of the two-state solution.

In public, the leaders of many Arab states, including those with whom Israel maintains relations, have roundly condemned its war in Gaza, driven by the fear of unrest and domestic instability. Behind closed doors, however, they worry about the threat of a resurgent Hamas, an extremist Muslim Brotherhood organization that has always posed a grave threat to Arab regimes—and serves the interests of their primary regional rival, Iran. Governments in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates fear that any success Hamas achieves in the current struggle will embolden Sunni jihadi forces in their own countries and Shiite militias that Iran backs in nearby states such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

In terms of securing global support for the war against Hamas outside of Europe, the United States, and the Gulf, the picture darkens. China and Russia have abstained from publicly condemning the Hamas attack, have sought to curtail Israel's efforts to dismantle the organization by calling for an immediate cease-fire, and have unleashed anti-Semitic propaganda on social media and state-controlled media outlets. For its part, Russia is driven by a desire to divert the West's attention and resources away from the war in Ukraine and believes it will benefit from a heightened Middle East conflict. There is little reason to think Israel can do anything to change Moscow's orientation.

China's position, however, is more nuanced. More than anything, the country fears a regional conflict that could trigger a surge in oil prices that might damage its flagging post-COVID economic recovery. Given Israel's alignment with the West and the United States, it might be difficult for Israel to influence China's policy toward its war efforts in Gaza. But Israel could leverage Beijing's concerns about regional escalation to encourage it to pressure Iran to restrain Hezbollah and its proxies in Iraq and Yemen. Simultaneously, Israel must strengthen its strategic ties with India, which has notably supported Israel and condemned the Hamas attack; strong relations with New Delhi could help counter the criticism Israel faces from other countries in the global South.

THE STRUGGLE BACK HOME

Alongside the complex military and diplomatic operations, Israeli leaders must launch a number of initiatives at home that will be no less challenging. First, they must begin to restore a sense of normality in a traumatized society, beginning with the rebuilding of the communities near Gaza's border devastated by the Hamas attack and the repatriation of residents who fled their homes in Israel's north as a precaution against an attack by Hezbollah. Economic activities throughout Israel should recommence immediately and should gradually return to their customary levels.

More fundamentally, the government must work to restore trust in the state's institutions among Israeli citizens. This will require new and unified leadership, the coordinated mobilization of all government ministries, and an official investigation into the origins of the Hamas attack. The current government—and especially Netanyahu—is unfit for this task. He and his close allies, after all, are responsible for the failure to address the problem of Gaza and Hamas over the past 15 years and for the unprecedented rift in Israeli society that reduced its preparedness in the months leading up to the

attack. Israel will have to hold elections as soon as possible after the ground operation in Gaza ends, as long as security conditions, including in the north, allow for it.

Even before the main ground operation concludes and Israeli troops withdraw, Israel should initiate a dialogue with Arab countries and international partners to formulate a plan for the future governance of Gaza. The most promising approach would be the establishment of an interim administration to oversee the territory until the Palestinian Authority is capable of assuming that role. This administration would be led by the United States and the five Arab states that have established peace agreements with Israel. To pave the way for the PA's eventual return to Gaza, the international community, with Israeli assistance and coordination, must work with the PA to build its governing capacities and address the corruption in its ranks.

Significant backing from the affluent Gulf Arab states will be indispensable to tackle the diverse economic, political, and security aspects of governance in Gaza. In this regard, the renewal of normalization talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia is crucial, as will be the integration of the kingdom into the project of governing Gaza. Tehran's role in helping Hamas develop in recent years may have heightened the level of interest in normalization within the anti-Iranian bloc of Arab countries. A new Israeli government committed to strengthening the PA and maintaining an open perspective on a two-state solution could further propel the normalization process forward.

A war against Hamas and the possibility of discussing a two-state solution may appear to sit uneasily. But since its inception, Hamas has opposed and undermined the prospect of two states; whenever talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization seemed to gain momentum, Hamas

reliably launched terror attacks. The organization adamantly rejects the Oslo accords, refuses to acknowledge Israel's right to exist, and openly pursues its destruction. Consequently, the removal of Hamas from power in Gaza is not an impediment to the two-state idea: it is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for any positive advancements in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and in the Middle East in general.

BACK TO BASICS

In the wake of the trauma of October 7, Israel finds itself in a new reality. Going forward, it will have to set aside perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions that have become customary in recent years and return to some foundational principles that it has neglected.

To deal with the presence of threatening military forces along its borders, Israel may find it necessary to shift from a reactive strategy of retaliation to a more proactive approach involving preventive strikes. Dismantling the Hamas regime in Gaza will help restore deterrence. The country will also need to reassess, enhance, and potentially overhaul its early-warning system, especially by increasing the use of human intelligence sources. The IDF will also need to shift its focus to anticipating breaches and building secondary lines of defense. The onus of achieving decisive outcomes will always rest on Israel's shoulders. Despite Israel's enduring commitment to self-reliance, however, it may prove necessary to formulate a more closely coordinated joint strategy with the United States, the country's most steadfast ally, and even some additional partners.

The last time Israel faced a challenge even remotely like this was in 1973. And at first, the Yom Kippur War seemed like a defeat for Israel; the Arab states certainly saw it that way. In the end, however, Israel came out on top, and its victory led to a groundbreaking peace agreement with Egypt—an

outcome that set in motion virtually every positive development that has taken place in the region since then. It is too early to tell whether Israel will be able to once again turn suffering and loss into peace and progress. But even in this grim new reality, there is some cause for hope.

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