



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Why Netanyahu Must Go

After the War, Israel Will Need a Two-State Solution He Cannot Deliver

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After October 7, Israel became a different country. Since that day, when Hamas terrorists infiltrated Israel, brutally murdered over 1,400 people, and took more than 220 as hostages, it has been clear that Hamas cannot be allowed to remain in charge of Gaza. Defeating Hamas is in the free world's interest as well as Israel's: French President Emmanuel Macron has suggested creating an international coalition to fight Hamas.

Israel's war is not a war of choice against the Palestinians but an inevitable campaign to free ourselves, as well as the people of the Gaza Strip, from the cruel grip of Hamas. Israel's military campaign must succeed. But organizing and sustaining it will require establishing political objectives for its

aftermath. And a victory over Hamas alone will be insufficient to heal the horrific wounds Israel has suffered in this act of terror. The country that Israel becomes in ten years will depend on the political choices it makes now, not only the military decisions: its security and prosperity will turn on whether it creates a new political horizon for its region and makes serious advances toward an eventual two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians.

As it works to defeat Hamas militarily, Israel must also work to define its long-term strategy. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is unfit to direct any part of this process—neither the war to defeat Hamas nor efforts to secure a more lasting peace. Israel must prioritize a larger political vision, not just for the sake of reducing tensions with nearby countries and avoiding engulfing its region in violence but for its own sake: to secure its future as the democratic nation-state of the Jewish people and to preserve its core values of freedom and justice—values it shares with the United States.

SOWING SALT

After Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon disengaged from Gaza in 2005, his successor, Ehud Olmert—in office from 2006 to 2009—tried to work with the Palestinian Authority to strike a peace deal that included Gaza. But shortly after taking over from Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu, a reckless and cynical leader, sought to strengthen Hamas's position in Gaza. He espoused the ill-fated notion that Hamas's rule in Gaza was fundamentally good for Israel: Israeli interests were better served by Palestinian disunity—with Gaza split from the West Bank, where the more moderate PA holds sway—than by political unity among Palestinians.

Many Israeli critics pointed out the discrepancy between a key speech Netanyahu delivered at Tel Aviv's Bar-Ilan University in June 2009, in which he endorsed a two-state solution, and his subsequent actions, which

reinforced the perception that Israel had no legitimate Palestinian negotiating partner and promoted Israeli settlers' creeping annexation of the West Bank. Netanyahu allowed Qatar to fund Hamas and released more than a thousand Hamas prisoners in exchange for one captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit; over the last 12 years, Netanyahu has blocked the efforts of organizations such as the World Bank to rehabilitate Gaza because these efforts entailed involving the PA.

Netanyahu believed that severing political ties between the West Bank and Gaza would impede any peace process that could lead to a two-state outcome. His wish to subvert this process was driven by an even higher ambition: to prevent the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state and the partition of the Holy Land.

In fact, the opposite is true: that partition, despite the security risks it might pose, is essential to preserve Israel's identity as a democratic state for the Jewish people. A one-state solution cannot safeguard a Jewish state. In a democratic Israel that included the West Bank and Gaza, Jews would make up slightly less than 50 percent of the population. But by maintaining the status quo, Israel is drifting from its democratic values. Israeli settlers in the West Bank enjoy rights that are vastly superior to those afforded Palestinians, and two separate legal systems govern the lives of Jews and Palestinians there while Gaza has been ghettoized, without an airport and with its land and sea ports almost totally blocked by Israel.

To be clear, none of these realities remotely justify or pardon the atrocities Hamas committed on October 7. But the horrific events that day do demonstrate just how unsustainable, and volatile, this abnormal reality is. It only helps create fertile soil for the flourishing of the most inhumane forms of terrorism.

FOOLISH GAMES

Shortly before Netanyahu took power in 2009, a Dahaf Institute poll found that 78 percent of Israelis were amenable to resolving this unsustainable situation via a two-state solution. But rather than face up to the task of tackling that two-state peace plan, Netanyahu forced Israelis to play a role in a strategic kabuki that devolved into a farce. Israelis put up for many years with continual barrages of rockets directed by Hamas at their cities and villages. Few other countries would tolerate such a situation. Netanyahu asked Israelis to place inordinate faith in technology, such as the Iron Dome rocket interceptors developed with the United States, to minimize the damage from rocket fire.

All the while, Netanyahu allowed Qatari envoys to periodically enter Gaza with suitcases full of millions of dollars in cash. In return, he imagined he was keeping Gaza on a “low burner,” simmering with resentment but never quite boiling over into a full-blown humanitarian crisis; he allowed Hamas to survive and averted his gaze as it continued to arm itself. He also tried to forge a peace deal with Saudi Arabia that essentially ignored the Palestinians.

This plan was intended to preserve the ultra-right, annexationist coalition that brought him back to power late in 2022. And it allowed him to intimidate the judicial system and avoid a conviction in his ongoing, multiyear criminal trial for corruption. Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition has been squarely focused on expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank and annihilating the possibility of a two-state solution. Over the past several years, Jewish settlers have increasingly harassed, intimidated, and terrorized Palestinians in the West Bank; Netanyahu’s government has practically ignored these acts, allowing them to become a norm.

Content that any threat to the status quo from the Palestinians had been managed, Netanyahu also knowingly weakened the Israeli military through his recent focus on judicial overhaul. He ignored strong warnings from veterans of Israel's security establishment such as General Moshe Yaalon and General Amos Malka—as well as many other groups—that this regime change disguised as reform could damage Israel's national security by eliminating its separation of powers, weakening its law enforcement bodies, undermining its economy, and assaulting the fundamental values that kept Israeli society cohesive.

The stage set for this play now lies in wreckage.

A NEW IDEA

As of September 2023, according to a Geneva Initiative poll, 42 percent of Israelis supported a two-state solution. This represents some erosion of public faith in the idea since Netanyahu took power. Given how aggressively Netanyahu has tried to quash any possibility of a two-state solution, however, it is meaningful that significantly more Israelis still said they preferred it above any other possible outcome.

It is too early to know how Hamas's October 7 massacre will change the Israeli public's perception of a two-state solution. Those who try to understand Israel today must look at the faces of Israelis who saw their loved ones murdered, tortured, beheaded, burned to death, or maimed before their eyes. It will take years before the Israeli public comes to terms with the depth of their trauma and their loss of their sense of security.

Before any two-state solution can be tackled, Hamas must be removed from power in Gaza. This will not be a simple undertaking, especially given the terrorist group's cowardly practice of hiding behind Palestinian human shields by tucking its offices, and even its arms caches and rocket launchers,

into places that are particularly dense with civilians. Toppling Hamas may require further difficult fighting in urban areas.

The Israeli military can succeed. But any land invasion must be well calculated, with a strong plan for what happens on “the day after.” It cannot be blundered through because of public pressure or a desire for revenge.

A few days after Hamas’s attack, several centrist Israeli leaders—including former Defense Minister Benny Gantz and General Gadi Eisenkot, a former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff—joined Netanyahu’s government, forming a war cabinet. The presence of more rational voices in Israel’s government is a positive sign. But there remains a danger that intense fighting in Gaza may ignite new conflicts in additional arenas such as the West Bank and Israel’s border with Lebanon. A carelessly executed Gaza invasion that kills many civilians or creates a humanitarian crisis could bring many more thousands of Muslims who sympathize with the Palestinian struggle and suffering into the streets, destabilizing Israel’s Arab neighbors.

Most of all, an operation in Gaza must send the right message to Palestinians. Once Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have been removed from power, it will be incumbent on Israel to reboot its entire approach to the civilian Palestinian population, including in Gaza.

Hamas is an idea: the idea that Jews must be permanently removed from the Middle East through violence. This idea will appeal to many Palestinians as long as there is no real peace option to which they can attach their hopes. It is an idea that will never be defeated with guns. There must emerge a better idea, a more attractive idea—an idea that does not assume Jews and Arabs are locked in a zero-sum game in the Middle East but offers a win-win scenario to people on both sides.

Israel must provide that idea. Israeli leaders must offer the Palestinians, including those who live in Gaza, a real horizon for peace that affords them national dignity. Netanyahu's defenders claim that he never had other policy options because he had no good Palestinian negotiating partner. This is simply not true. Although Hamas has always positioned itself against any compromise, the PA has long supported a two-state solution. Its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, could have been—and could still be, despite his weaknesses—a partner committed to peaceful partition.

FROM WAR TO PEACE

The destruction of Hamas's armed forces will create a political vacuum in Gaza. Israel will have no interest in resuming control over the Palestinian population there. It must, instead, help design a process in which an international force coordinated by Israel, the PA, and the United States—with the cooperation of neighboring Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—takes responsibility for a transitional period, restoring public order and repairing infrastructure. This transition could tee up the negotiations for a two-state plan modeled on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, subject to modifications.

That initiative proposed that Israel could secure peace with the entire Arab world in exchange for its withdrawal from the West Bank and Arab-dominated parts of Jerusalem. A workable modification would include a limited territorial swap to reduce the number of Israeli settlers that would have to be relocated to about 100,000, proper security arrangements, and an agreement on how to resolve the issue of Palestinians who left Israeli territory in 1948. This is the only possible outcome that can enable Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace and secure their prosperity, and it will render Israel safer, more legitimate, and more aligned with its own founding national values of freedom and justice.

Netanyahu cannot direct any part of this process—not the peace process, and not the war, either. He has completely lost the trust of not only his foes but now, also, many of his friends. And lately, he has lost the trust even of members of the top ranks of the Israeli security establishment. On October 29, he created chaos with a late-night tweet that shifted blame onto Israel's intelligence agencies for missing the signs of Hamas's attack. He later deleted the tweet and apologized, but this kind of impulsive, defensive episode that undermines hardworking officials and threatens his fragile unity government may well recur. Most important, he cannot lead Israel in a unique moment that requires the country to seize an opportunity to change the direction of its conflict with the Palestinians. He must resign immediately if Israel is to have any chance of rebounding from the destruction he has wreaked on its security, economy, and society.

Israelis have been profoundly comforted by U.S. President Joe Biden's supportive words and deeds, such as dispatching two aircraft carrier groups to the region and sending munitions to the Israel Defense Forces. They especially appreciated Biden's swift visit to their country, a war zone, during which he met with the families of Israelis abducted into Gaza. The fact that Israelis had to seek immense comfort and moral support from Biden over the last several weeks only underscores how completely insufficient Netanyahu has become to the tasks his country faces.

As long as Netanyahu remains prime minister, Biden must make sure he understands that the United States has not issued him a blank check to do whatever he wishes in Gaza. Biden should stress that the United States views a two-state peace process as an imperative, a vision he has hinted at already. The Palestinians have felt abandoned by the recent Israeli-Saudi rapprochement, and this feeling must be corrected. Any similar future deals that U.S. and Israeli leaders pursue must squarely address the problems

Palestinians face, incorporating binding, continuous, and benchmarked processes for Israeli disengagement from the West Bank and for the rehabilitation of Gaza.

Providing the Palestinians a horizon—a concrete timeline for the establishment of a state of their own in which they can exercise their national aspirations, practice self-determination, and live free of occupation—will send a positive message not only to the Palestinians but to the international community and to Israel's Arab neighbors. But as Israel now pursues a difficult and complicated military campaign, we Israelis must also start telling ourselves a different message: that the enemy is Hamas, not the Palestinian people. That will require a new, reasonable government in Israel.

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