

# Regime Change, Israeli-Style

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## The war triggered by the shocking Hamas assault will be the first zero-sum conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena since 1948, and U.S. policymakers should prepare accordingly.

Israel has defined its war aims as the destruction of Hamas—of Hamas’ political leadership, its military capability, its administrative capacity, its control of Gaza; everything. As such, the war triggered by Hamas’ barbaric attacks on Israeli civilians on October 7 will be the first zero-sum conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena since 1948. What lies ahead, therefore, will be different than every conflict in the memory of current policymakers—including that of the octogenarian in the White House. This would be “regime change,” Israeli-style.

Consider this: In 1948, Israel fought for its existence against a coalition of invading Arab armies. The Arabs (except for the Jordanians, that is) sought to snuff out the Jewish state moments after its birth. They failed in their war of annihilation against the Zionists, however, and settled for armistice agreements. Since then, in not a single conflict of the bloody history between Arabs and Israelis has the eradication of the enemy—not its army, not its military capabilities, but the enemy state itself—been viewed as a war aim by one of the combatants.

Put aside the rhetorical flourishes of leaders in times of national reckoning—it is clear this was not the case in 1956, when Israel joined with Britain and France to re-open the Straits of Tiran; not in 1967, when Israel launched preemptive strikes against efforts to tighten the noose again on its shipping; and not in 1973, when Egypt’s Anwar Sadat sought to break the mindset of Arab military failure, eventually to push for peace with honor. Even in 1982, when Israel went on the offensive against Yasser Arafat’s PLO (then still bent on its own war against Israel’s existence), Israel may have entertained the thought of eradicating the PLO, but ultimately settled on just its expulsion from Beirut. So too in 2006, when Israel and Hezbollah fought a horrible war to a draw, leaving an uneasy mutual deterrence in its wake.

In the past fifteen years, since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in a violent, bloody coup—not, as some have mistakenly written, in elections—there have been a series of violent rounds between them and Israel. Thousands of Hamas rockets have landed inside Israeli cities, towns and villages, terrorizing millions; Israeli air strikes in turn have devastated large parts of Gaza in attempting to decimate Hamas’ military infrastructure. In the process, large numbers of innocent civilians have been killed.

But each of these rounds of fighting was Clausewitzian—politics by other means—namely, a lethal but limited “negotiation” over Qatari walking-around money for Hamas, loosening or tightening rules for the import of goods into Gaza (and the corruption opportunities that went with it), and the number of workers Israel would let through the border to earn an Israeli wage (and, in the case of some, return with extensive tactical intelligence used in the recent attack). Israel’s goal was never to destroy Hamas but to periodically “mow the grass,” as Israeli defense officials often said. For its part, Hamas always seemed to trigger a conflict in order to gain some benefit for itself, to sustain its control of Gaza and score political points at the expense of the feckless Palestinian Authority in Ramallah—it never before launched a war that Israelis would view as an existential threat.

All that changed on October 7. The enormity, the audacity, and the depravity of what Hamas did—slaughtering more than 1,300 civilians in a way not experienced by Jews since the darkest days of the Holocaust—changed the rules of the game. To Israelis, this may have been a surprise. But it was not like Sadat’s surprise—war as politics—but the rudest of awakenings, opening eyes to the almost incomprehensible realization that while they were engaged in what they thought was an almost gentlemanly conflict, defined by clear rules and boundaries, the enemy was readying itself for a diabolical, bloodthirsty massacre.

For Israelis, whose national pastime is to avoid being taken for a *freier*—a sucker—the old rules of “limited war” are gone. In their place is Israel’s first adoption since 1948 of “regime change” as a goal of war.

What was Hamas thinking, one asks? Surely Hamas leaders—whether in the tunnels under Gaza City or the hotels of Doha—must have known that their dramatic change of tactics would trigger an equally dramatic change in Israeli strategy. Perhaps they thought the taking of hostages would provide an escape, as was the case with Chechen jihadists in the first round of their fighting against Russia in the mid-1990s. Or perhaps they were counting on Iran to ease the pressure by having Hezbollah launch its vaunted missile arsenal against Israel, opening a horrific, second front of war for Israel.

If either (or both) is the case, so far—and I repeat, so far—Hamas has miscalculated. While Israelis have a record of being so sensitive to the loss of innocent life that they are willing to make insanely lopsided deals to free prisoners, it appears in this instance that Hamas has overreached. Yes, Israelis remain keen to win the freedom of the 200 women, men, children, elderly and mentally ill held by Hamas, but they don’t seem in a mood to let their captivity prevent the strategic necessity of wiping out Hamas—a necessity for its own sake as well as for two other reasons: to restore Israelis’ confidence in the competence of their government and army, and to restore Israel’s badly dented deterrence in the minds of friends and adversaries around the Middle East.

As for Iran, it may decide to spend down its Hezbollah assets to capitalize on the moment. But so far, it appears Tehran is keeping its powder dry. After all, it has already scored a substantial set of victories—denting Israel’s image of invincibility; driving wedges between Israel and its Arab peace partners; damaging prospects for a Saudi-Israel breakthrough—so it may want to cash in its chips now instead of upping the stakes by unleashing Hezbollah and risking a direct confrontation with the United States. In such a case, Hamas will have forgotten the basic lesson of Middle East politics: if Israel seems indifferent to Palestinian civilians, Arab and Muslim governments—including the ayatollahs in Iran—are no better and perhaps worse, given that they profess their love for Palestine but do precious little on behalf of actual Palestinians.

Where does this leave America? God bless Joe Biden, whose instinctive reaction was to understand the historical gravity of October 7 for the Jewish people and the world's one Jewish state, and thus framed his administration's response in those terms. But Biden is a political leader, not a pastor or priest, and he has multiple interests to balance. So he has sanctified the right—even the duty—of Israel to act with all its might against Hamas while performing the essential duty of a friend to ask tough questions: “Are you sure this is driven by strategy and not rage? Do you know how this war ends?” And he has spoken eloquently on behalf of innocent Palestinians caught between the hammer of Hamas' atrocity and the anvil of Israel's rightful retribution, and has taken meaningful steps on their behalf to secure humanitarian relief and protection. That so many—from campuses to Congress—accuse him of the calumny of complicity in genocide reflects their moral defect, not his.

All this and the real fighting has not even started yet. For Israel, the truism about no battle plan surviving contact with the enemy may apply; events, as Harold Macmillan might have said, may compel a change in Israel's strategy. But one should not discount the overpowering sense of national mission that flows from October 7, leaving Israel apparently undeterred by the inevitability of battlefield losses, setbacks and failures, as it pursues the fight to finish off Hamas for good.

In this scenario, Washington's most helpful role is to help Israel complete the task as quickly as possible, at the least cost to civilian life as possible. In practical terms, this will demand more U.S. support for Israel, not less, and that will require even more political courage from Biden and his administration in the months ahead—courage to buck up wobbly allies; courage to ignore the jeremiads of self-righteous columnists; courage to face down critics in his own party. And, lest we forget, Biden will need courage to insulate this conflict and make sure the regional situation, horrific as it is, doesn't get worse—imagine, for example, trying to deter the opening of a second front if Iran already had a nuclear bomb. I pray the old man from Scranton has it in him.

As an inveterate optimist, I hope that out of this crisis comes opportunity. Perhaps this opportunity is eventually to make in Gaza a reasonably well-functioning administration that puts first the needs of its citizens, and not the ideology of its rulers. Maybe this is to repair the dysfunctional Palestinian Authority, so that it can one day assume its rightful responsibility as ruler of Gaza and peace partner with Israel. With luck, this opportunity is to squeeze the irrationality from Israel's political system, so that its government reflects the generally sensible (if scarred) views of the vast middle of the electorate, and not its messianic or egomaniacal fringe. And possibly, this opportunity includes Arab states reverting from the frenzied populism of the day back to the constructive pattern of recent years, of defining their policies based on national interest.

But I know the history of this scorched region—to paraphrase H. L. Mencken, no one ever went broke in the Middle East betting on disappointment, frustration, and failure. Still, if only a slice of that hope comes to pass—just a slice—the Middle East would again prove itself the land of miracles.

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