

The Rapid Return of Israel's Disastrous Policy

by Daniel Pipes

Judging by the way Netanyahu has managed Gaza in the last 13 years, it is not certain that there will be a clear policy going forward.

--Tal Schneider, *Times of Israel*

“Everything changed” in Israel on Oct. 7. But did it? Understanding the mistakes that led up to the Hamas massacre provides a basis to evaluate Israel's long-term response to that day. Contrary to general opinion, I shall argue that the presumptions behind those mistakes remain in place and will not change unless Israelis adopt a radically different attitude toward the Palestinians.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Davos in January 2023.

The Road to Oct. 7

Israeli military planners coined a Hebrew term, *conceptzia*, “the concept,” in the late 1960s. It held that Egypt's Anwar el-Sadat would not go to war until 1974, when his military had acquired advanced Soviet fighter jets that permitted it to take on the Jewish state's air force. Israel's Agranat Commission, which investigated how the Egyptians and Syrians surprised Israel in the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, largely blamed the *conceptzia* for a blindness to the preparations taking place before its very eyes.

The future commission inevitably analyzing Israel's unpreparedness on Oct. 7, 2023, will surely blame that surprise on a second erroneous conceptzia. It held that, David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy explains,

The conceptzia transformed blood-curdling threats by Hamas into empty words.

under the heavy burden of governing the Gaza Strip, Hamas would feel the need to prove itself through economic performance. Specifically, economic inducements towards Hamas would moderate its foundational belief that Israel is an illegitimate entity whose very existence must be extinguished and its citizens killed. This Israeli *conceptzia* was driven by many factors, but at its core, it was based on the idea that Hamas was undergoing an organizational evolution in which it would now value even modest increases in living standards in Gaza. Economic advancement would bring calm, as it gave Hamas something to lose.

Note the words “something to lose”: this phrase summarizes the new conceptzia, a belief that Hamas could be bought off or tempered through economic benefits. A headline published days before Oct. 7 captured the depth of this misunderstanding: “IDF and Shin Bet call on government to continue economic activities with Gaza. Senior security officials ask political echelon to increase work permits for Gazans to maintain calm on the border.”¹ *Maintain calm*. As Col. (res.) Eran Lerman explained just ahead of Oct. 7:

The ruling center-right in Israel takes a “conflict management” approach to the Palestinian issue. They prefer to leave open the prospect that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may yet be possible one day, as the region changes and new leaders emerge. But until then, they believe, what Israel should do is ease tensions and improve living conditions for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, while reserving the right to hit back at terrorist activity in a selective and intelligence-driven manner.

The conceptzia transformed blood-curdling threats by Hamas into empty words. The security establishment ignored Fathi Hammad announcing in 2019: “We are sharpening the knives. ... If we die it will be when we are killing you [Jews], and we will cut off your heads, Allah willing... We must attack every Jew on the planet – slaughter and kill. ... I will die as I blow up and cut – what? The throats of the Jews and their legs. We will tear them to shreds, Allah willing.” Only by completely disregarding such statements could Aryeh Deri, a senior Haredi politician, admit after Oct. 7 that he “never imagined that we were dealing with such murderers who are capable of acting with such cruelty.”

Conversely, those rejecting the conceptzia met with exclusion and scorn. National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir complained that his calls for the assassination of Hamas leaders caused him to be barred from cabinet discussions. Itai Hoffman, the chairman of a security organization near the Gaza border, accused the government, “We warned you about the situation. How can it be that you all sat here and kept silent? ... You

¹ IDF refers to the Israel Defense Forces; Shin Bet (or Shabak) is Israel's internal security service.

have abandoned us.” A kibbutz member pointed out that his community had only four rifles, adding “We have been screaming for years.” Yehiel Zohar, the mayor of a town near Gaza, complained that senior security officials belittled his warnings, with maps, infiltration routes, and defense plans, about hundreds of murderers entering his town and killing its residents: “Forget about it, it won’t happen.”

Avichai Brodetz, whose family was taken hostage by Hamas, vented bitter frustration at a Likud member of parliament about Hamas.

The army could easily have destroyed them, but the entire conceptzia of the IDF collapsed [i.e., was wrong]. Hamas understood this, and they were far more clever than we were. They carried out an exceptional operation, raped our women, and killed our children because the IDF was not there. This did not happen because of Hamas but because of the conceptzia you used. It would have been so easy to destroy Hamas with tanks and planes – but they simply weren’t there.

When Hamas drilled in plain sight, holding a live-fire exercise of blasting through a mock wall and raiding a mock town, then posted a video of this, Israelis ignored it. As the *Jerusalem Post* reports, “IDF lookouts who had warned that they were concerned about the situation along the Gaza border in the months before the Oct. 7 attack were told to stop bothering their commanders and even threatened with a court-martial.” A noncommissioned officer specializing in Hamas military doctrine wrote three documents warning about Hamas’ plans, emphasizing its exercises simulating an invasion across the border into Israeli residences and even reporting that senior

Hamas officials came to watch the exercises. Her warnings went up the hierarchy, only to be met with the response, “You are imagining it.” A senior IDF officer scorned such warnings as “fantasies” and refused to act on them. Just a day before the attack, a lookout



Hamas in Ramallah.

reported seeing suspicious activities but commanders “discounted” her concerns, telling her “Hamas is just a bunch of punks, they won’t do anything.”

Many observers held Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally responsible for the conceptzia. Thus, Israeli defense analyst Yoav Limor finds that

he promised to eliminate Hamas and claimed that Hamas is the same as ISIS, yet continued to effectively allow the organization to build up through various means, including money, supply trucks, fuel, electricity, labor, and more. He, who saw Hamas as a devil, should have destroyed it, but during his long rule, he did the opposite: It thrived and became a monster. Netanyahu effectively

legitimized Hamas, and that allowed a misconception to form around it.

Israeli journalist Nadav Shragai agrees, holding Netanyahu “responsible for the misconception and its outcomes. He is its father, mother, and guardian.” But to be fair, Shragai adds,

it must be noted that almost all of Israel's highest political and military officials, right and left, and most of the media, too, lined up behind the separation policy, either as a systematic worldview or by acquiescing in it. Almost all of them backed Netanyahu when he refrained from crushing Hamas by land; almost all of them belittled the Hamas threat.

Along those lines, Ben Gvir speaks of a “conceptzia camp” that included former prime minister Naftali Bennett and former IDF chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eizenkot. The conceptzia even had followers among those living closest to Gaza. Hanan Dann, a member of a kibbutz devastated on Oct. 7, explains:

We were glad that workers from Gaza were coming to Israel with work permits to have jobs to meet Israelis, to see that we're not all “those devils.” We all really believed that things are changing, that Hamas has maybe matured from being this terrorist group to be the grown-up taking responsibility for its people, worrying for its welfare. And that concept really blew up in our face.

To summarize: Israel's leadership hardly paid attention to the Islamist and jihadi nature of Hamas, believing that Israel's economic strength, military superiority, and

technical advancement moderated Hamas, rendering it less dangerous.

Apparent Changes

The post-Oct. 7 reckoning was brutal. “So many policies and paradigms,” David M. Weinberg of the Misgav Institute writes, “have been proven faulty, phantastic, illusory, and grotesque.” The idea of a Hamas-governed Gaza placated by economic well-being, Martin Sherman of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies concludes, is but “a hallucinatory pipe dream.”



In reaction to such criticisms, politicians abruptly and radically changed their tune. Netanyahu spoke at least fourteen times of victory and winning. “Victory will take time. ... now we are focusing on one goal, and that is to unite our forces and storm ahead to complete victory.” He told soldiers “The entire people of Israel are behind you and we will deal harsh blows to our enemies to achieve victory. To victory!” And: “We will emerge victorious.”

Many others in government followed suit. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant quoted himself informing President Joe Biden that Israel's victory “is essential for us and for the United States.” To his soldiers, Gallant declared, “I am responsible for bringing

victory.” Bezalet Smotrich, the minister of finance, announced the halt “of all budgetary outlays and redirected them to one thing only: Israel’s victory.” He called the goal of Israel’s war with Hamas to be “a crushing victory.” Benny Gantz, a member of the War Cabinet, deemed it “the time for resilience and victory.” The deputy parliamentary speaker called on Israel to “burn Gaza.” An unnamed defense official announced that “Gaza will eventually turn into a city of tents. There will be no buildings.” The minister for heritage endorsed attacking Gaza with nuclear weapons.

Legions of other Israelis also called for victory and the destruction of Hamas:

- Naftali Bennett, former prime minister: “It’s time to destroy Hamas.”
- Yaakov Amidror, former national security advisor: Hamas “should be killed and destroyed.”
- Meir Ben Shabbat, former national security advisor: “Israel should destroy everything connected to Hamas.”
- Chuck Freilich, former deputy national security advisor (in *Ha’aretz*): “Israel must now deal Hamas an unequivocal defeat.”
- [Tamir Heyman](#), former IDF intelligence chief: “We have to win.”
- Amos Yadlin, former IDF intelligence chief: “We are going to destroy Hamas.”
- Yossi Cohen, former head of Mossad: “Eliminating Hamas officials is a decision which needs to be made.”

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Public figures expressed unprecedented verbal aggressiveness. Gallant called Hamas “human animals” and Bennett called them “Nazis.”

Television news anchor Shay Golden went off-script to unload a tirade:

We will destroy you. We keep telling you every day—we are coming. We are coming to Gaza, we are coming to Lebanon, we will come to Iran. We will come everywhere. You must take this into account. Can you imagine how many of you we are going to kill for every one of the 1,300 Israelis that you massacred? The death toll will reach numbers that you have never seen in the history of the Arab nations. ... You will see numbers that you never imagined were possible.

A hip-hop anthem promising to rain hell on Israel’s enemies jumped to the #1 spot. A pop singer called for Israel to “Erase Gaza. Don’t leave a single person there.”

And Israel’s voters? The Middle East Forum commissioned poll on Oct. 17² found extraordinary support for the destruction of Hamas and for a ground operation to achieve this. When asked “What should be Israel’s primary objective” in the current war, 70 percent of the public answered to “eliminate Hamas.” In contrast, only 15 percent answered to “secure the unconditional release of captives held by Hamas” and 13 percent “disarm Hamas completely.” Remarkably, 54 percent of those Israeli Arabs (or, more technically, voters who supported the Joint

² Shlomo Filber and Zuriel Sharon of Direct Polls Ltd. carried out the poll with 1,086 adult Israelis; it has a statistical sampling error of 4 percent.

List, a radical anti-Zionist Arab party), made “eliminate Hamas” their preferred objective.

Given the option of a ground operation in Gaza to eradicate Hamas or avoiding a ground operation in favor another way to deal with Hamas, 68 percent chose the former and 25 percent the latter. This time, 52 percent of Israeli Arabs concurred with the majority.

In short, a ferociously anti-Hamas and anti-PA mood came to dominate Israeli politics, with only the two left-wing parties (Labor and Meretz) somewhat in opposition. Even a majority of Israeli Arabs recognized the danger that Hamas and the PA pose to their safety and well-being. Victory had become a matter of consensus, or so it appeared.

Quick Revisions

But did that ferocity signify a fundamental shift in outlook or just a passing surge in emotions? Mounting evidence suggests the latter. American novelist Jack Engelhard noted in late November about the mood in Israel: “I am so damn depressed. ... I hardly hear any talk of victory anymore.” Indeed, the robust rhetoric of victory following Oct. 7 ended as abruptly as it began, replaced by negotiating with Hamas over terms for the release of just some of the hostages. More profoundly, Israeli officialdom and public alike showed signs of hastily reverting to the attitudes and policies that had led to Oct. 7.

Those policies rest on two main assumptions: that economic benefits—more work permits in Israel, a larger fishing zone, outside funding—gives Palestinians something to lose, taming them and making them less inclined to aggress; and that an Israel so much

mightier and more advanced than its Palestinian enemy can afford to make concessions.

Symptoms of the reversion include the following. The security establishment approved the entry of 8,000 West Bank workers to Israel, mostly to engage in agricultural work. It did so in response to Israel’s agriculture minister assuring his colleagues that the workers had been vetted and posed no danger. That thousands of workers from Gaza had spied on Israel and made themselves complicit in the Oct. 7 massacre seemed blithely to be

forgotten.

On the West Bank itself, Israel’s commanding general there issued oxymoronic orders limiting Arab access that appeared tough but changed very little. As explained by the Binyamin Regional Council, “There is no entry into Israeli towns for Arab workers. They will be permitted to enter industrial areas at night only.” Do marauders and murderers carry out their crimes only in daylight?

The Palestinian Authority (PA) that nominally governs part of the West Bank not only offered full-throated support for the Hamas massacre, but PA President Mahmoud Abbas’ Fatah movement even boasted of having a role in it. The PA also required mosques in its jurisdiction to instruct congregants that exterminating Jews constitutes an Islamic duty. Despite this, the Israeli cabinet continues to send tax monies to the PA. Gallant endorsed this decision, saying that “It is appropriate to transfer, and transfer immediately, the funds to the Palestinian Authority so that they will be used by its forces who help prevent terrorism.” (That

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theme of economic benefits never seems to die.)

Ben-Gvir tried to loosen the rules of engagement for police officers, permitting them in emergencies to shoot at the legs of aggressors but Gantz managed to deflect the vote, thereby keeping the more restrictive regulations in place.

Five days after Oct. 7, Israel shuttered its Public Diplomacy Ministry, providing a perfect symbol of Israel's historically hapless information efforts.

Contrarily, Israel's communications minister called Al Jazeera, the Qatari television channel, a "propaganda mouthpiece" that incites against Israel and attempted to close down its office in Israel. The government rejected his recommendation, wanting not to upset the Qatari government, which had helped with the release of several hostages, thereby ignoring its role in perpetrating Oct. 7. Yossi Cohen, the former head of Mossad, went further; he favored "refraining from criticizing Qatar."

Before the massacre, Israel supplied Gaza with 49 million liters of water, or 9 percent of the territory's daily consumption, through three pipelines. It cut all supplies after the massacre. But that lasted just twenty days, after which Israel reinstated 28.5 million liters through two pipelines. Why not all three? Because Hamas had damaged the third on Oct. 7, necessitating repairs. Not to fear: IDF Col. Elad Goren announced his office had "assembled a team of experts who assess the humanitarian situation in Gaza on a daily basis." Avigdor Liberman, head of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, called this "simple idiocy." Fuel supplies also resumed.

Talk of victory did not stop negativism from quickly rearing its head. "I don't see any

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kind of victory going out of this mess," comments *Fauda* creator Avi Issacharoff. Orly Noy of B'Tselem cries out to her Israeli

conationals, "I have no interest in the victory you're offering me. ... I'm ready to admit defeat."

The principal of a public high school in Tel Aviv devoted 45 minutes to talking to three students who had come to school wrapped in Israeli flags. During the conversation, one student reported, the principal pointed out that other students objected to such a display of patriotism, adding that "if a large number of students came to school wrapped in Israeli flags, he would end this immediately." So extreme had things become that even the far-left *Ha'aretz* newspaper ran a story under the headline, "Stop Applauding Hamas for Its 'Humanity'."

The Regavim organization warned that the Palestinian Authority has built close to 20,000 structures close by the Green Line, its border with the part of the West Bank under full Israeli control (Area C); it called this phenomenon "frightening and threatening ... a real danger; a ticking bomb." When presented with this information, the security establishment responds now as it did previously to the comparable threat from Gaza: it would rather ignore this topic or dismiss the buildings as organic construction by individuals.

If mid-October polling showed 70 percent wanting to "eliminate Hamas," in mid-November polling by The Jewish People Policy Institute,³ a mere 38 percent defined victory as "Gaza is no longer under Hamas control," a roughly 50 percent drop. Asked about the war's most important objective, a

³ By theMadad.com with 666 respondents on Nov. 15-18.

November poll of Israeli Jews by Hebrew University of Jerusalem researchers found that 34 percent say incapacitating Hamas (and 46 percent the hostages' return). Asked about making "painful concessions" to secure the hostages' release, 61 percent expressed a readiness, a near-tripling of the 21 percent ready to do so six weeks earlier. A poll by Israel's Channel 14 reported a 52-32 percent approval of the hostage agreement. The numbers—38, 34, 32—are impressively consistent.

Politicians and the security establishment drove previous flights from strategic reality (e.g., the Oslo Accords, the retreat from Gaza) but not this one. Here, the public pushed the destruction of Hamas aside in favor of rescuing the hostages. In the words of one survivor, Nadav Peretz, "We want two things. To see Hamas destroyed and to free the hostages. And right now, the latter outweighs the former." A mid-November *Maariv* poll found that the National Unity party headed by Gantz, a former chief of staff and the personification of the security establishment, jumped from 12 seats in the prior election to 43 seats in the next one. According to Nimrod Nir, a psychologist who led the Hebrew University survey research, "Our polling shows that the Israeli people were consistently ahead of the decision makers on this. As they learned about who Hamas was holding and under what conditions, the pressure to do something grew."

Politicians began seeking ways to square the circle. Former Israeli ambassador to the United States Michael Oren suggested changing the war goal "from annihilating Hamas to securing Hamas's unconditional surrender," thereby allowing Hamas to continue to exist. More specifically, he advocated offering Hamas "free passage from Gaza ... in return for the hostages' release." The talk about destroying Hamas had nearly vaporized.

The Hostage Deal

Speaking of hostages, the biggest reversion concerned them. Israel's President Isaac Herzog called Hamas "absolute evil," and then-Republican presidential candidate Tim Scott offered advice to the Israelis, referring to Hamas: "You cannot negotiate with evil. You have to destroy it." But just 1½ months after the massacre and weeks after the avalanche of calls for the destruction of Hamas, the Government of Israel reached a deal with the jihadi group, thereby undercutting its moral position and relapsing to the negotiating policy that brought about Oct. 7 in the first place.

The contents of the deal only made matters worse, for a desperate Israel made a majority of the concessions. In return for fewer than one-quarter of Israeli hostages being freed, all of them females and children, Israel agreed to: free 150 female and minor security prisoners (i.e., prisoners arrested in connection with offenses bearing on national security); permit an increase in water, food, medicine, and fuel to Gaza; and for four days not send warplanes over southern Gaza, halt drone aerial surveillance for six hours each day, and not attack Hamas.

Consider some implications of these terms:

1. Just a fraction of the hostages implies that the bargaining process will continue indefinitely, with multiple breaks. This suits Hamas' needs while disrupting the Israeli military campaign. As Col. (res.) Shai Shabtai explains, Hamas' "continued hold on the hostages has one object: to use endless negotiation in order to undermine the dismantling of its political and military power."
2. Interrupting surveillance permits Hamas fighters to escape their besieged tunnels or bring supplies into the tunnels.
3. Trading Palestinian security prisoners for Oct. 7 victims confirms Hamas' argument

that a moral equivalency exists between criminals and innocent civilians violently abducted.

In retrospect, that the same leadership team that brought on Oct. 7 also went on to sign the hostage deal hardly surprises: responsibility for the first made it vulnerable to the appeals of hostage families and foreign states. That Netanyahu and others—for example, the commander of the Unit 8200 that gathers about 80 percent of Israeli intelligence⁴—refused to take responsibility only compounded the problem. For Brodets, the hostage family relative quoted above addressing a Likud member of parliament, the conceptzia still reigns: “You are living in a fantasy and blaming Hamas when it is you yourselves who are to blame. The problem was you. Get that into your heads, and perhaps then you will be able to solve the problem.”

It gets worse. On Nov. 22, Netanyahu very unusually publicly announced that he had instructed Mossad to kill Hamas leaders “wherever they are,” by implication including those in Qatar. When pressed whether the ceasefire agreement with Hamas grants immunity to its leaders, he replied in the negative: “there is no commitment in the agreement to not act in a truce against the leaders of Hamas, whoever they are.” He further added that “such a clause does not exist.” Two days later, however, Georges Malbrunot of *Le Figaro* newspaper reported that a “generally well-informed source” informed him that Netanyahu assured Qatar at the start of the hostage negotiations that “Mossad would not go to the emirate to kill Hamas political leaders.” The *Jerusalem Post* then “indirectly confirmed that Israel made commitments to Qatar on this issue.”

It bears noting that not all Israelis place personal concerns over the national

interest. Eliahu Liebman, father of the hostage Elyakim Liebman, summed up the dilemma in



his valorous protest against the proposed deal: “We want all of our hostages released, and the only way to do that is by attacking the enemy with all of our strength, without interruption and without surrendering to their demands, as if they are the victors.” Tikvah, an organization of families related to hostages, concurs: “The most correct and effective way of retrieving the hostages is by applying uncompromising pressure on Hamas, until the hostages become a liability for Hamas instead of an asset.”

Conclusion

I observed in a late October article that “the inflamed Israeli mood of the moment will likely fade with time, as old patterns reassert themselves and business-as-usual returns.” I was wrong in one respect; it did not take time. Rather, it occurred almost right away, within two weeks. Contrary to the initial impression that “everything changed,” at the time of writing—late November—almost nothing has changed.

⁴ According to one account, that commander neglected his intelligence duties in favor of helping the disadvantaged, dealing with climate change, and various social issues.

This reversion also fits a much larger pattern. From 1882 until the present, the two feuding parties to this conflict have compiled extraordinary records of sterile continuity. The Palestinians maintain a mentality of rejectionism (no, no, and never to everything Jewish and Israeli), while Zionists stick to conciliation (accept us and we will enrich you). The two go around and around, hardly evolving or making progress. Change will only come when Israelis break with the traditional Zionist mentality and seek Israel Victory.

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