UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL'S WAR IN GAZA

Raz Krauss Peer

Publication Credits

Author
Raz Krauss Peer,
Israel Policy Advisor, Jerusalem Office
of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

Table of contents

1. Gaza and the conflict until the 7th of October

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is arguably the most complicated international conflict in the world, and even though many serious attempts to resolve it have been made over the years, very little has changed. Up until the current war, most Israelis thought that a two-state solution was desirable, but not actually possible. That might explain why polls consistently show Israeli support for a two-state solution on the decline. Israelis simply do not have much faith in dialogue-based solutions anymore.

1.1. Palestinians – No partners for peace?

This is usually attributed to the Israeli narrative that there is no Palestinian partner for peace. This "No Partner" narrative was coined by former Prime Minister Barak in 2000, after failing to reach a peace agreement. Barak was the leader of the Israeli peace camp at the time, but his statement has over the years become a symbol of the shift in Israeli society, from Peace to Security, and from trust building with the Palestinians to unilateral Israeli steps to "solve" the conflict.

The disengagement from Gaza in 2005 is a case in point. Prime Minister Sharon initiated a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, retreating all presence of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) after forcefully evicting all Israeli settlers, effectively handing the entire strip to the Palestinian Authority. Sharon justified this move by claiming it would improve border control and reduce security costs, but the move also gave many Israelis hope that peace could be achieved even without a proper Palestinian partner. Many expected that a free Gaza would become a Middle Eastern version of Singapore.

But these hopes did not last long as the 2006 Gaza elections were won by the fundamentalist Islamist terror organization, Hamas. In the following year Hamas took over completely, dismantling the fragile but existing democratic system and executing political rivals and dissidents. During that time, Hamas also kidnapped an IDF soldier into the Gaza Strip, which was followed by an IDF siege of the Strip. Since then, there have been numerous IDF military operations in the Gaza Strip over the years.

Over the last 18 years, there has been an ongoing debate trying to explain why the disengagement from Gaza failed, and Hamas took over. Many in the shrinking Israeli peace camp blamed Sharon for not involving the Palestinian Authority in the process and acting unilaterally, thus hurting those in the Palestinian Authority who champion non-violent resistance. Many others claim that without IDF support, the Palestinian Authority was incapable of maintaining control and preventing the rise of Hamas anyway. Regardless of why it failed,

Gaza is used by the Israeli political right-wing as a warning of what might happen in the West Bank following any future agreement, further shrinking the peace camp.

1.2. The growing Threat of Hamas

There are those who chose to see Hamas as an asset, and not just a threat. Unlike the Palestinian Authority, Hamas does not enjoy international legitimacy and support. As a fundamentalist Islamist terrorist organization committed to the destruction of Israel, it could not be reasoned with, it was by definition "Not a Partner for Peace". For years, the Israeli right-wing, led by Netanyahu, used the growing strength and support of Hamas, on the Palestinian Authority's expense, to explain why they avoid peace talks and persuade the Israeli public that peace is not possible, and that security is the best they can get.

Until the terrorist attack of the 7th of October in southern Israel, many in Israel accepted the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an unchangeable reality. **Most Israelis despise the occupation, but they also see it as a necessary evil, without which their security cannot be guaranteed**. For years, while the Israeli left failed to supply a credible diplomatic plan to deal with the Palestinians, the Israeli right "delivered". With a combination of high walls, technological innovation and an overwhelming military presence, they provided Israelis with relatively safe lives.

With the growing threat of Hamas from the Gaza Strip, the occupation of the West Bank was seen by more and more Israelis as a lesser and necessary evil. But the threat of Hamas also seemed to be contained. Thanks to the Iron Dome system that intercepts most rocket attacks, and the fence that prevented infiltration into Israel, Hamas also became an unchangeable reality. Periodic volleys of rockets at Israel followed by violent clashes in the Gaza Strip became a regular thing, but with "No Partner" on the Palestinian side Israelis settled for security.

This all changed on the 7th of October, when Hamas launched a massive, coordinated attack, in which thousands of armed terrorists, breached the Israeli defenses, raided the border adjacent towns and villages in Israel where they slaughtered men, women and children, burned down the houses and kidnapped hundreds into the Gaza strip. The magnitude and the brutality of the attack shook Israeli society to the core, as they realized that just like the left failed to bring them peace, the right failed to supply security through strength. Hamas could not be appeased, nor could it be contained.

1.3. Political protests and Israel's Darkest Hour

The attacks of the 7th of October hit Israeli society when it was already in troubled times. Ever since the Knesset (Israeli parliament) was disbanded in November 2018, Israel is stuck in a never-ending cycle of early elections. The last round, which took place in November 2022, resulted in Netanyahu returning to power, despite the strong anti-Netanyahu sentiment in the public and the efforts of the anti-Netanyahu political bloc.

Since he was boycotted by all the moderate forces in Israeli politics, Netanyahu resorted to building a coalition with the Israeli far right and the Ultra-Orthodox allies. The new government not only included the far right, but depended on them to stay in power, as it enjoyed only a narrow majority. This allowed many political forces that were previously on the sidelines of Israeli politics to move to the front, and advance policies that until recently seemed unheard of.

The most dramatic of these policies is the government's Judicial Overhaul plan. Shortly after the new government was formed, it introduced a legislative package aimed at reforming Israel's judicial system, with the aim of reducing the judicial branch's balancing power. The public reaction to the judicial overhaul was soon to follow as massive protests filled the streets and transportation routes were frequently blocked throughout the country. The protests set a clear red line for the government – respect the rules of Israeli democracy.

At the peak of the protests, in March, Defense Minister Gallant raised concerns about a growing protest trend of IDF reserve soldiers and volunteers stating publicly that they will not serve under a pseudo-democracy. This new kind of ultimatum forced the government to postpone their legislation as well as agree to initiate compromise talks with the opposition. These talks did not yield much and with talk of a potential civil war in the background, the government went back to advancing changes in the Israeli legal system, and the protests returned in full swing.

On the 4th of October, 3 days before the Hamas attack, it was still unclear if the pressure on the government is going to halt the Judicial Overhaul, but in a moment everything changed. In a few horrible hours, when the scope of the tragedy was still unclear, Hamas attacks from Gaza changed from an unchangeable reality to an unbearable one.

2. Israel's reaction, objectives and post-war options

2.1. The return of the existential threat for Israel

The first few days after the attack were very chaotic. It was unclear what the scale of the attack was, how many were killed, how many kidnapped, and most importantly – who else might join in. While Hamas attacked from Gaza, Hezbollah could join in from Lebanon. The West Bank could also be ignited, as was the case in previous clashes with Gaza. The last time Israel had a war on multiple fronts was 50 years ago. Back then, just like now, Israel was attacked during a holy day, and was caught off guard. The Yom Kippur war of 1973 has been branded in the Israeli national memory as a tragedy, even though Israel won the war. It was such a national trauma because all the signs of war were there, but the leadership ignored them.

The Yom Kippur war was also the last war in which not winning meant the annihilation of Israel, and it was the last time Israelis felt they faced an acute existential threat. Hamas, despite its declared goal to destroy Israel, never posed a threat to Israel's existence. Rockets could be intercepted, tunnels collapsed, and infiltrators were caught. Israel could reach a ceasefire and prepare for the next attack. Israelis never imagined this sort of full-fledged invasion could happen today.

In many ways, Israeli society went back in time on the 7th of October. The steady stream of images of Jews dragged from their homes and slaughtered, brought back national memories from times when Jews did not have a strong army or a state. At first, it seemed as if the army and the government were nowhere to be found. Many Israelis stepped in to fill the perceived vacuum, fighting independently with old equipment, or driving to the south to rescue survivors until reinforcements arrived.

After a few days, Israel jumped forward to 1973, to a time where they did have an army and a state but had to constantly fight and win in order to survive. This new-old reality turned many of the current internal discussions irrelevant, as a sense of shared destiny and solidarity spread over Israeli society. Old divisions were abandoned, protesters no longer threatened to refuse military service and lawmakers shelved all unurgent legislation. Even opposition parties that boycotted Netanyahu for years offered their support, and some, like Benny Gantz, even agreed to temporarily join a wider emergency government.

Unlike the seemingly fragile Israel of the last few months, that many assumed was on the brink of civil war, today's Israel appears to be united in purpose and committed to defeating Hamas. **With the threat of war on multiple fronts looming beyond the horizon, and with rising cases of anti-Semite attacks around the world, most Israelis feel that they don't have a choice but to join forces, fight and win.**

2.2. Two contradicting objectives?

What does winning look like? The vast majority of Israelis agree on two clear war goals: The destruction of Hamas and the release of Israeli hostages. That said, there is a clear divide between those who prioritize the former and those who prioritize the latter. The dismantling of Hamas is seen by many as the bare minimum Israel needs to accomplish to remove what many see as an existential threat. Without achieving this goal, many believe the south of Israel will never be truly safe. Many others see the release of the hostages as equally if not more important. A moral obligation in the form of a social contract, that is essential to the survival of Israel. Since the 7th of October, many family members of Israeli hostages set up a camp in Tel Aviv in what has been renamed "Hostages Square" and has become the center of protests dedicated to the hostage issue.

With many hostages released in the last days, many Israelis now face the painful reality that both objectives are somewhat contradictory. Any release of hostages by Hamas will require three things: A temporary ceasefire that would allow Hamas to regroup, the delivery of fuel and other resources into the Gaza Strip, and the release of Hamas terrorists from Israeli prisons. Any one of these would extend and further complicate the IDF campaign in Gaza. On the other hand, Israel does not know where the hostages are kept in Gaza. As the fighting continues and expands into Hamas hideouts and strongholds, the risk of more Israeli hostages being killed also increases.

Clearly, to ensure that one of these two goals is achieved, the other must be risked. This uncomfortable truth has the potential of tearing a newly united Israel apart once more, as Israel faces the consequences of the partial hostage release deal. In order to fend off criticism, the Israeli government is insisting that the current hostage release deal will not harm the war effort in any way. Some even suggest that as the war continues, Hamas is expected to become more desperate and thus suggest more deals. This, combined with expected growing protests in Israel demanding the release of all the hostages should increase the pressure on the Israeli government. Avoiding future deals will become more and more difficult, and Israel will eventually be forced to make a clear choice, reject a hostage deal or harm the war effort.

.

2.3. Potential post-war options for Gaza

The two war objectives are not the only threat to Israel's newly found solidarity. There are many different ideas for what should be done with the Gaza Strip and Hamas after the war. The destruction of Hamas is widely agreed upon in Israel, but what does "destroying" Hamas mean? Unlike previous clashes between Israel and Hamas, this time, removing their military capabilities is not seen as good enough. The vast majority of Israelis see the removal of Hamas from power as the bare minimum condition for ending this war.

This begs an important question: if Hamas is removed from power, who is going to go into the created vacuum? Sceptics of the Israeli campaign in Gaza would claim that the forceful removal of Hamas is not possible, and that a ceasefire agreement with the terror organization is inevitable. As far as Israel is concerned, this is simply not an option. Hamas rejects any form of negotiation and is unequivocal in its intention to use any ceasefire to regroup and strike again.

The Israeli leader of the Opposition, Yair Lapid has stated that the Gaza Strip should be returned to the Palestinian Authority after the defeat of Hamas. Prime Minister Netanyahu, on the other hand, claims that Israel has to retain security control in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli consensus stands somewhere between these two statements, but there is no clear solution that a majority of Israelis would accept.

During the Oslo Accords, the West Bank was divided into three area types: Area A with full civil and security control by the Palestinian Authority. Area B, with Palestinian civil control and joint Israeli-Palestinian security control. Area C, with full Israeli civil and security control. A potential post-war settlement for the Gaza Strip could probably go along one of these three options or become some sort of combination of the three just like in the West Bank.

2.4. "Winning Together, Argue Later"

For now, Prime Minister Netanyahu has been very vague when referring to any official desired reality after the war, to avoid antagonizing any of his allies. This in turn incentivized far right opportunists in the government to appeal to their political base and make outrageous declarations about the re-establishment of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, a "second Nakba" and even a potential nuclear attack on Gaza. This forced Netanyahu to clarify that there will be no re-establishment of the Jewish settlements evicted in 2005, not to mention the other shocking proposals.

Netanyahu has been unclear both regarding how he chooses to prioritize Israel's two main war goals, and regarding his plans for the Gaza Strip. In both cases, being ambiguous allows him to avoid antagonizing the different factions and retain their support until he has to decide. This strategic ambivalence seems to be a crucial part of Netanyahu's "Winning Together, Argue Later" strategy. By not voicing a clear opinion on difficult topics publicly, Netanyahu manages to delay any potential backlash until after the war.

There is a clear benefit to the "Winning Together, Argue Later" strategy. Even before the war started, support for the government was at an all-time low, and Israeli society was being torn apart from within. Reaching a national consensus regarding the future of the Gaza Strip would have been impossible. By not stating what the national strategy is, the government avoids disappointing any of the different factions, motivating them further to fight for the future they want.

While this strategy allows the government to operate more effectively as well as postpone internal arguments until after the war, there is also room for concern. After all, "Argue Later" might as well be "Too Late to Argue". If the government's chosen strategy is one that a majority of Israelis would object to, they would only get to object to it retroactively

3. Observations on liberal pathways and international support

3.1. Why is Netanyahu still in power?

At first glance, it is hard to understand why Israelis would allow this government to run the war unchecked. On paper, Netanyahu does not seem like an ideal candidate to lead Israel through this crisis. Not too long ago, hundreds of thousands of Israelis went to the streets and protested against his government, which they described as "a threat to Israeli Democracy".

After the war started, many continued to demand that Netanyahu takes responsibility and resigns. Not only that, but for years Netanyahu championed strengthening Hamas instead of the Palestinian Authority, insisting they were the lesser threat. But despite all this, his government enjoys the complete support of the public. **Why then, does the Israeli public agree to be led by a non-transparent government that they can't trust? The reason is simple – fear.** Israelis truly believe that the situation is so dire, that they don't have a choice but to rally around Netanyahu's flag.

This fear is what keeps Netanyahu in power, it is what convinces so many Israelis to support a government they don't trust. They keep their criticism to themselves – but only until the war ends. Recent polls might shed some light on where this criticism might be directed. According to all recent polls, Netanyahu's 64 seat government is expected to lose about a third of its seats, dropping far below the 60 seats needed to form a coalition. As the war continues, the Israeli public continues to support its government, but once the war ends, it will demand answers, it will demand that those responsible will be held accountable. This seems like a sound strategy, as the government gets the chance to redeem itself, and Israel avoids complicated mid-war elections.

What remains to be seen is whether the government rises to the challenge or spends the time it was given to continue advancing the same policies that made it widely unpopular before the war. The fact that the government is still reluctant to redirect coalition funds to the war effort, is not very encouraging in that regard.

3.2. A safe Israel is a restrained Israel

What is encouraging is the high level of support that Israel is receiving from western governments. This support is essential, not only for any future resolution of the current war, but also to help restrain Israel's response in Gaza and the region. Israel is motivated by renewed fear of its destruction and believes it cannot afford not to deal with its perceived existential threats, no matter the cost. **International support**

by Israel's allies could sooth Israeli fears and thus motivate Israel to restrain its military action in a way that no sanction can.

It is true that President Biden's iconic "Don't" speech served as a threat to deter Hezbollah from attacking Israel, but it also assured that Israel will not attack Hezbollah. The massive assault on Gaza and the ambitious goal of removing Hamas from power is evidence of the Israeli resolve in dealing with an existential threat. In this sense, Hezbollah is not very different from Hamas.

Hezbollah's forces can replicate the 7th of October attack if instructed to by Iran and Israel is not willing to wait until it does. Why then did Israel not attack Hezbollah until now? Some might claim Israel is trying to avoid a two-front war. But, with half of its forces already defending the northern border, with frequent Hezbollah attacks over the last month and with tens of thousands of Israeli civilians evicted from the northern part of the country, many Israelis feel there is already a two-front war.

I would offer that it is not fear of war, but rather the American support that alleviated Israeli fears, and allowed a more moderate policy. Counterintuitively, to minimize the scope of human suffering in Gaza, a similar approach should be taken. If Israel does not feel it has its back against the wall, it would be much easier to restrain its Gaza offensive as well as bring it to the negotiation table after the war.

As far as Israel is concerned, Hamas must be removed from power, but opinions vary regarding the future of the Gaza Strip after the war. Many doubt the Palestinian Authority's ability or willingness to stop future terrorist attacks on Israel, and some would even prefer a complete re-occupation of Gaza. A potential future compromise could include some sort of international force that would replace IDF presence in the Gaza Strip and maintain security control for some time. This option will only be viable if Israel can trust the relevant international actors to take its security needs into consideration.

3.3. The role of the international community

This does not mean that supporting Israel's war in Gaza should be absolute. Even allies should draw clear red lines, as Egypt did when it refused to take in Palestinian refugees. Egypt has a peace treaty with Israel and has also been very cooperative in maintaining Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip for years, but as refugees started flooding their border, Egypt clarified that it sees the expulsion of Palestinians into Egypt as a red line.

The importance of clear red lines is that they help the different actors understand how important various aspects of this conflict are to each other. Israel will insist on removing Hamas from power, and Egypt will insist on keeping Palestinian refugees outside of Egypt. Israel and Egypt's ability to properly define these red lines allows them to avoid a clash. Imagine if Israel defined its red line as "having no Hamas supporters in Gaza"? In that case the two would clash.

There are of course some red lines from a liberal political perspective that should be taken into consideration as well, but one must be very careful when defining them. For example, one should insist that Israel follows international humanitarian law, and that intentional targeting and killing of civilians should be treated as a red line. But this statement also hides the uncomfortable truth that the unintentional death of civilians cannot be a liberal red line. Defeating a terrorist organization intentionally embedded within and under densely populated areas without some civilian deaths is impossible. Meaning that demanding something of the sort from Israel is equivalent to demanding that they give up on removing Hamas from power. In other words, the red lines would clash. If the liberal world is to influence Israel's policy positively, it must better define its red lines.

The alternative is setting an unachievable standard that can only be reached if Israel gives up on both of its war goals and agrees to continue living in fear. Since this is not something that Israel will be willing to consider, it is the equivalent of setting Israel up to fail. Israel takes great care to minimize civilian casualties. It alerts residents before airstrikes, it maintains a humanitarian corridor to the south, where it allows humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip. Any fighting around these areas comes from direct attacks of Hamas, whose strategy is to prevent civilians from fleeing. Despite all this, Israel is being heavily criticized internationally. **If every attack is a war crime, and every war is genocide, how is this distorted version of international humanitarian law any different from plain demonization?** Expanding the definitions of what constitutes a war crime to suit a political agenda is wrong and could also be detrimental to the normative standard of international humanitarian law in the future.

3.4. Shaping the reality of post-war Gaza

Regardless of ethical considerations, the demonization of Israel and the IDF by some international actors might in the end serve as a double-edged sword. After the war ends, an isolated Israel would be much more motivated to trust no one else with its security. That means seeking complete Israeli security control of the Gaza Strip. In other words, **Excessive international criticism of Israel might increase the likelihood of far right extremist policies and hurt any future diplomatic efforts of moderate forces.**

This is also true for international calls for a ceasefire. Unlike previous clashes in Gaza, this time Israel feels compelled to remove Hamas from power. As the pressure for a ceasefire increases, so will Israeli concern that Israel is forced to end the war before Hamas is defeated. This "War Timer" might push Israeli decision makers to hurry their campaign in Gaza and prioritize fast options over safer ones.

When considering the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, it is very important to distinguish between steps that can reduce human suffering and those that might extend it. In order to differentiate between the two, one first needs to answer the following interlinked questions: Do you support Israel's right to defend itself and see Israel's decision to remove Hamas from power as justified? If the answer is yes, then any steps that delay the defeat of Hamas will also extend the war. For example, while humanitarian aid is essential, fuel, which will most likely be confiscated by Hamas, will extend the war and therefore the suffering of the Gazan population.

The international community should support Israel's efforts to remove Hamas from power in the Gaza Strip and not play into the hands of actors who are trying to weaponize international humanitarian law to bash Israel. But it should also demand clear answers regarding the Israeli government's plans for the Gaza Strip in the future. A hostile international community won't stop Israel's war in Gaza, but a friendly international community could positively influence any future agreement.

About the author

Raz Krauss Peer

is an Israeli political analyst, focusing on Israeli internal politics. With a background in international relations and political science from the Hebrew University and years of political activism, Raz has spent the last decade studying the Israeli political ecosystem.

In 2020, Raz joined the Friedrich Naumann Foundation's Jerusalem Office, and today Raz serves as a Policy Advisor on the FNF Israel team. Before joining FNF, Raz produced political commentary as a news producer for NHK.