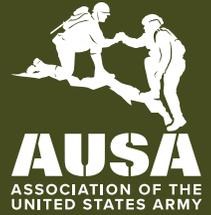


What Israel Can Learn from the U.S. Global War on Terrorism

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Introduction

As the initial fog of war began to clear in southern Israel on 7 October 2023, and the scope of Hamas' attack became clear, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went live on national TV around 11:00 a.m. In front of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Headquarters in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu proclaimed, "Citizens of Israel, we are at war. . . . I am initiating an extensive mobilization of the reserves to fight back on a scale and intensity that the enemy has so far not experienced. The enemy will pay an unprecedented price. . . . We are at war and will win."¹ As head of state, Netanyahu's desire to convey the gravity of the moment and to show the world that his government was prepared to use the overwhelming force of the IDF is certainly understandable. That day—7 October—has become Israel's 9/11, and Netanyahu's speech harkened back to President George W. Bush's address to the nation on that fateful day. The president captured the mood of the country by declaring, "Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. . . . Our military is powerful, and it's prepared."²

Both Israel and the United States had been attacked in a way nobody had imagined up to that point. Both countries, especially Israel, had been victimized by terrorism in the past, but felt confident that their enemies were deterred adequately enough to prevent the spectacular attacks of 10/7 and 9/11. Both peoples and governments wanted retribution as soon as possible and set out to achieve it using their well-trained and well-equipped militaries. The United States embarked on its Global War on Terrorism in the 20 years following 9/11, but would find itself stuck in quagmires that had little to do with the threats that had first been responsible for the terrorist attack. The United States was able to sustain the fight over such a protracted period due to its vast financial resources, and, more important, its all-volunteer professional military, in which the direct impacts of war are borne by the less than one percent of Americans serving on active duty at any given time. Israel, however, does not have these luxuries. It is a small country with a GDP of \$539 billion³ (versus the U.S. GDP of \$28 trillion in 2023⁴) and a population of just under 10 million⁵ (compared to the U.S. population of 337 million). Israel also has a policy of national conscription, with 40 percent of men and 33 percent of women serving on active duty.⁶ With that amount of skin in the game, the way Israel conducts its military operations is subject to public opinion to an extent rarely seen in the United States. With these constraints in mind, Israel would do well to pay heed to the lessons that the United States learned in the Global War on Terrorism: determine the

There are notable similarities between Israel's response to the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and the U.S. response to 9/11. In both scenarios, leadership immediately came under intense public pressure to respond with overwhelming military force to exact retribution—which led to combat power being deployed before clear military objectives had been articulated. Consequently, objectives have been required to change to fit the situation on the ground.

end game; consider the war for hearts and minds and the cost of “going it alone”; avoid a multi-front war; and beware unintended consequences.

First and Foremost: Determine the End Game

There was enormous public pressure on the leadership of both the United States after 9/11 and Israel after 10/7 to do *something*, but exactly what was not immediately clear. For the United States, killing or capturing the perpetrators of 9/11 was obvious, but ensuring that Afghanistan would not harbor future terrorists capable of another 9/11 necessitated expanding that initial limited mission. The Bush administration made a decision early on not just to destroy al Qaeda, but also to replace the Taliban regime with a democratic one. Twenty years and hundreds of billions of dollars later,⁷ it is clear that the decision to nation-build in Afghanistan was a faulty one. The United States had assumed that it could destroy the Taliban regime, and that, in the vacuum of power, new leaders and parties would be able to take over without a great deal of U.S. intervention.

Immediately after 10/7, Israel initiated a massive call up of reserves and concentrated tremendous combat power on the Gaza border, where it remained for 20 days. During this time, it was clear that Netanyahu’s political-security cabinet was agonizing over just what their mission should be. When the ground offensive into northern Gaza finally commenced, Israel’s goals were to destroy Hamas, capture or kill all of its leaders, shatter its military capacity, and end its power in Gaza.

However, the past three months have shown that accomplishing the total destruction of Hamas necessitates the total destruction of most of the Gaza strip. Hamas is prepared for a long war in Gaza, having stockpiled weapons, missiles, food and medical supplies in its labyrinth of underground tunnels.⁸ The world has watched as Israel subjects Gaza to massive artillery bombardments and air strikes, unable to spare civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals due to the presence or proximity of Hamas fighters and Gaza’s dense urban topography. As of 9 February 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported over 27,000 Palestinians killed, over 67,000 injured, and over 65,000 housing units destroyed in Gaza.⁹

With all this death and destruction playing out for the world to see, the question remains as to how close Israel is to accomplishing its initial objective of destroying Hamas—and whether that is even possible. As the United States discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq, military campaigns to eradicate deeply-rooted, political-military movements usually fail. And that is exactly what Hamas is, as it has roots that extend far beyond Gaza.

There are already signs that Israel’s military leadership may be trying to refine its objectives in Gaza. Although Netanyahu reiterated his objective of “eliminating” Hamas in a recent speech, IDF intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva left out the destruction of Hamas in his list of objectives laid out in a recent speech.¹⁰ If Israel modified its objectives to degrading Hamas’ military power and preventing it from effectively governing Gaza, it could already point to much success, based on the number of high-profile Hamas leaders killed since the start of the war, as well as the IDF’s destruction of key command and control infrastructure.

A War for Hearts and Minds

Just as the United States discovered the hard way in Afghanistan and Iraq, initial military success often gives way to a long and frustrating counter-insurgency campaign. It marked time for the first three years of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, conducting operations to destroy various insurgent groups. In 2006, General David Petraeus began implementing a “Clear, Hold, Build” policy for operations in Iraq that recognized the need to provide infrastructure and services to the population once insurgents had been cleared out of an area.

After the dust settles from Israel's military campaign, Gazans will be faced with unprecedented destruction and bleak prospects for the future. If Israel wants to ensure that Gaza never threatens Israel's security in the future, it needs to clear, hold and build in Gaza. This means setting conditions to alleviate suffering, to create housing and to restore livelihoods. Financed by the Gulf states with support from the United States and the European Union (EU), a massive postwar reconstruction plan is taking shape for Gaza that would provide \$3 billion annually for 10 years.¹¹ The plan would rebuild Gaza's infrastructure, unite Gaza and the West Bank under Palestinian Authority (PA) governance and reform Palestinian security forces.

Under normal circumstances, a country engaged in a counterinsurgency would be overjoyed by the prospect of the international community coming together to finance postwar reconstruction. However, Israel is opposed to the Gulf states' current offer because Netanyahu's far-right government is diametrically opposed to allowing the PA to have any role in postwar Gaza. The Gulf states are pushing back, saying their funding is contingent on PA governance.

Should the two sides fail to reach an agreement, the burden will fall on Israel to make postwar Gaza livable. Israeli resistance to that idea is understandable on an emotional level, but practically, it will be a necessity. If Israel doesn't step in, Gazans will be forced to live in hopeless poverty that will surely resurrect Hamas or something similar. Even if the reconstruction plan were to be funded by the international community, Israel would most likely still have to deploy a peacekeeping force to provide security, as well as do much of the reconstruction work itself. Furthermore, in order to regenerate Gaza's economy, Israel would have to provide jobs to much of the population, as Gaza would be unable to provide enough itself.

In the end, however Gaza gets rebuilt and whoever pays for it is less important than the recognition that long-term peace between Israel and Gaza depends on providing a future for the people who live there. This is not a military problem, but a socio-economic one.

The Cost of Going It Alone

While the United States had the support of NATO and the wider international community to go to war in Afghanistan, Iraq was mostly a unilateral effort from the start. The Bush administration felt that the danger Iraq posed was too great for the United States not to act, even if that meant doing so without UN or NATO support. Top Bush administration officials believed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, and that once the Saddam Hussein regime was toppled, a Western-friendly democratic government would naturally take its place. It also mistakenly believed that once that happened, the international community would come around and help contribute to Iraq's reconstruction. Of course, none of this came to pass, and the United States suffered a great blow to its international credibility and image.

Since Israel's founding in 1948, the Jewish state has always been in a precarious position, geographically and militarily. Although it has received support from the United States since the six-day 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel has always had to fight for its survival by itself, often against overwhelming odds. Prior to 10/7, that was slowly changing through the "normalization" of Israel's relations with many of its Arab neighbors. Normalization has been driven by Iranian malign influence in the greater Middle East that has enabled Israel and Arab states to find common cause for the first time in history. For decades, Iran has been developing a "Shia Crescent" consisting of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, through which

Israel, a small country with limited resources, does not have the manpower or the financial capacity to occupy and rebuild Gaza by itself. It should look to the lessons the United States learned during the Global War on Terrorism—determine the end game; consider the war for hearts and minds and the cost of "going it alone"; avoid a multi-front war; and beware unintended consequences.

it could directly threaten Israel. Simultaneously, the Sunni Gulf states and Shia Iran have been competing for dominance in the region. The Abraham Accords turned that newfound Israeli-Arab solidarity into tangible results. Mediated by the United States, the accords established diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel and Bahrain in 2020. Israel went on to sign separate normalization agreements with Sudan and Morocco. Additionally, the United States had been brokering negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia prior to 10/7.

It is imperative for Israel to continue on the path to full normalization with the Arab states after the war with Hamas, so that, among other reasons, Israel never has to “go it alone” again. But the longer and bloodier Israel’s occupation of Gaza is, the greater the price Israel will have to pay to get normalization back on track. Indeed, derailing the process was likely a primary driver for the timing of Hamas’ attack, as they feared that Israeli-Arab normalization meant that the window was closing on Arab support for the Palestinian cause. But again, Israel will have to make some difficult concessions. Even before the war, the Saudis were asking Israel to make a very limited commitment to the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state. Now, Israel will have to demonstrate a much greater commitment to the two-state solution. Additionally, as previously touched on, the Saudis are also stipulating that the PA be allowed to assume governance of the Gaza Strip, something that Israel’s far-right government has said it would not accept.¹²

Normalization is not the only partnership issue Israel needs to tend to. Its longstanding friendship with the United States, while still steadfast on the governmental level, has been showing signs of fraying in American public opinion for some time. While baby boomers and Generation X poll as more sympathetic to Israelis, millennials have been shifting toward Palestinians. Gallup polling finds that “millennials are now evenly divided,” with 42 percent sympathizing more with the Palestinians and 40 percent with the Israelis.¹³ Even among evangelical Christians, support for Israel is plummeting. Over the span of just three years, from 2018–2021, support for Israel among younger evangelicals dropped from 69 percent to 33 percent.¹⁴ Clearly, Israel ignores these trends at its own peril. For now, U.S. support for the Jewish state remains ironclad, but as time passes and millennials take over the reins of power, Israel may not be able to count on U.S. political-military support to the same degree it always has.

Avoid a Multi-Front War

In planning the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden hoped that the United States, looking for retribution, would invade Afghanistan and end up getting bogged down in an occupation similar to what happened after the Soviet invasion.¹⁵ The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to prop up a communist regime, but exited 10 years and over 50,000 casualties later with that objective unfulfilled. The defeat shattered the image of an invincible Red Army, which many scholars attribute to the emboldened independence movements that ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But after the U.S. invasion, the Bush administration was surprised at how quickly the Taliban was defeated. It happened so fast that bin Laden was reduced to apologizing to his followers for getting them into that situation.

Israel should note that, despite America’s initial success, the Afghanistan war was relegated to a secondary concern when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Even with its great financial and military resources, it had to divert its focus and attention to Iraq—and that was the critical mistake. The task of nation building in Afghanistan would have been a monumental challenge for America even without having to worry about a second war. But

It is imperative to U.S. interests and regional stability that Israel sets attainable objectives and meets them as soon as possible. If it doesn’t, the progress made in normalizing Israel’s diplomatic relationships with its Arab neighbors over the last few years will be increasingly difficult to restore.

with focus and expertise being devoted to Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan became even more difficult.

Israel is now confronted with a similarly daunting challenge in Gaza. Opening a simultaneous campaign against Hezbollah (discussed in more detail below) on the Israel-Lebanon border would suck up the finite resources that Israel can currently allocate to Hamas. As already discussed, Israel can call on fewer financial and military resources—especially manpower—than the United States could. Their massive reserve mobilization in October took a large swath of Israel’s population away from civilian jobs and family obligations, and Israel has already begun demobilizing certain units as a result of this pressure.

The U.S. military found out the hard way that allocating combat power to multiple theaters simultaneously resulted in an unbearable deployment rotation for its troops. Combat tour durations were lengthened from 12 to 15 months during the 2006–2008 “surge,” and the associated stress on military families, mental health and equipment maintenance increased commensurately. Those stressors were felt to an even greater degree by specific high-demand, low-density specialists, such as Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technicians, combat engineers, air defense troops and special forces operators.

In addition to manpower concerns, worldwide ammunition stockages have been critically low for the past year. The United States has been resupplying Ukraine with large donations (over two million) of 155mm artillery shells and certain air defense munitions. The United States has more than doubled production of these shells, going from 12,000 a month before Russia’s invasion to the current 28,000 a month.¹⁶ EU members likewise emptied their stocks, and the EU as a whole launched a plan to supply one million 155mm rounds between March 2023 and March 2024.¹⁷ Although the United States has begun diverting ammunition resupplies from Ukraine to Israel, opening a second front against Hezbollah would put an even greater demand on U.S. supplies. The United States has been sourcing a large proportion of these donations from its own war stocks, and any new production would likely be used to backfill U.S. stockages. And with Congress now calling into question the unconditional continued military support to Ukraine, there is no guarantee that supplying Israel would not also become the target of greater scrutiny.

These issues would be of concern if Israel expanded the war against Hamas to a war against Hezbollah as well. Of course, Hamas and Hezbollah have different roots. Hezbollah is an Iranian export that draws its power from the Shia population, whereas Hamas is an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood and draws its support from the Palestinians, who are mostly Sunni. However, the two groups have found common cause against Israel and the United States; they consider themselves as partners under the “Axis of Resistance” moniker.¹⁸ Hezbollah is better equipped than Hamas, but its estimated 15,000 rockets are meant to deter Israel from an attack on Iran itself.¹⁹ Hezbollah and Iran may not want to utilize that stockpile on behalf of the Palestinians. In addition, Hezbollah and Iran benefit from continued international pressure against Israel’s actions in Gaza, and they are likely content with Israel being labeled as the aggressor.

However, Hezbollah would probably respond robustly if Israel attempts to push it back farther from the Israel-Lebanon border. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah by, among other things, requiring Hezbollah to withdraw to positions 10 miles away from the border, north of the Litani river. Hezbollah’s positions on the border were to be taken over by the Lebanese army, which is not as well trained or equipped as Hezbollah. The resolution was never fully implemented; Israel states that Hezbollah has positioned its forces south of the Litani river. Consequently, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told mayors of northern Israeli towns in early December that if the UN fails to enforce the resolution, Israel might do so itself.²⁰

An open war against Hezbollah has the potential to draw Iran in more directly, which could quickly escalate the war from a regional conflict to a global one. While nobody wants this, the network of alliances that binds Israel to the West and Hamas and Hezbollah to Iran (and from Iran to Russia) could quickly escalate into a scenario much akin to the European alliances that ignited World War I.

Beware Unintended Consequences

The United States went to war in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein, but ended up triggering a sectarian civil war. By the time *Operation Iraqi Freedom* ended in 2011, Iraq was left with a weak central government, a shattered economy and a military that melted away when the Islamic State forces invaded a large swath of the country only a few years later. With Saddam gone, the minority Sunni population that had controlled Iraq since its independence in 1932 was disempowered. The Shia took over the reins of government, and Iran seized the opportunity to capitalize on Shia dominance over its longtime adversary. Since then, an emboldened Iran has played significant roles in attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq, the Syrian Civil War, and in the arming, funding and training of Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The Houthis are a Shia rebel group that has held the Yemeni capital of Sanaa since 2014 despite a Saudi-UAE campaign to defeat it. The group has been destabilizing the region with missile and drone attacks for years, targeting Saudi oilfields and Israeli, U.S. and European shipping. They have been the target of recent U.S. airstrikes to neutralize the threat they pose to international trade as well as U.S. and Israeli interests in the region. The Houthis serve as a prime example of how an empowered and resurgent Iran has increased its reach through proxies.

On top of that, Iran has begun cooperating with Russia in its war in Ukraine, providing drones in exchange for billions of dollars' worth of Russian military equipment.²¹ The United States has unwittingly opened the door to Iranian malign influence and expansionism throughout the region.

The potential for similar unintended consequences is high in Gaza. Although Hamas and Hezbollah remain threats to Israeli security, they are not existential threats. Iran, however, is. The Islamic Republic has long pledged to wipe Israel off the map. Those threats have been reiterated since 10/7, with the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Peyman Jebelli, stating, "Israel is digging its own grave and won't last beyond 2040."²² Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said in 2015 that "Israel must be destroyed within 25 years," and even set up countdown clocks in Iranian cities to hammer the point home.²³ Every day that media attention criticizes the Israeli occupation in Gaza, public opinion sways toward seeing Israel as an aggressor who is overreacting. Iran helped set the conditions for the current situation, and it only stands to gain as Israel is sucked into an occupation that is too costly to continue, but even costlier to exit.

Furthermore, the prospects of a two-state solution now seem more likely than ever before. The current Israeli government has always emphasized that it sees a Palestinian state as unacceptable. Israel's Communications Minister, Shlomo Karhi, tweeted in December: "There will be no Palestinian State here. We will never allow another State to be established between the Jordan [River] and the sea."²⁴ But again, the longer and bloodier the war in Gaza, the more difficult it becomes for Israel to keep rejecting the idea of a Palestinian state. As already discussed, the Gulf states have already tied a PA-controlled state to its offer to fund reconstruction in Gaza. If Israel refuses this offer, it will have to rebuild a viable Gaza itself, or force the Palestinians to live in a wasteland. Neither scenario would be tenable for Israel in the long run.

Conclusion: Focus on Hamas

One of the lessons that the United States learned in Afghanistan is to identify the enemy, and then stay laser-focused on that enemy alone. Early on in the war, the United

States conducted operations targeted at the perpetrators of 9/11, mostly at al Qaeda and a limited number of Taliban senior leaders, such as Mullah Omar. Even though Osama bin Laden would not be killed until 10 years later, he had been effectively neutralized as the day-to-day head of al Qaeda. Had the United States adopted a more limited scope in Afghanistan, it might have been able to sell those early successes as a “mission accomplished” to the American public, and in doing so, avoid spending 20 years and hundreds of billions of dollars in a failed nation-building campaign. While al Qaeda was an international terrorist group that sought safe haven in Afghanistan, the Taliban was a home-grown group with deep roots in the country. But, instead of separating the two different groups, America went to war with both.

Israel also must make a distinction between Hamas and the PA. The PA is easy to criticize due to its corruption and ineffective governance in the West Bank. On the other hand, it has recognized Israel and supports a two-state solution. The PA did not attack Israel on 10/7—Hamas did. Yet, before the war, the Netanyahu government did little to rein in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. In fact, one of the reasons for the delayed IDF response on 10/7 was that forces previously assigned to the southern command near the border with Gaza had been reassigned to protect settlers in the West Bank. Going forward, Israel should make amends with the PA and use it as a negotiating partner to siphon off support away from Hamas.

The desires for retribution and responding with overwhelming force are human. But in times of crisis, leaders must have the patience and courage to think several steps ahead and to consider the ramifications of the actions they take. For a state like Israel, born of the tragedy of the Holocaust and committed to “never again” allowing the Jewish people to be victimized and defenseless, tempering its response to 10/7 and avoiding the pitfalls that the U.S. experienced during its long war on terrorism is especially difficult. But until Israel can stomach compromise solutions vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the international community, it will forever live in the shadow of a dispossessed and hopeless people plotting their next move.



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