



The End of Mowing the Grass: If Israel Wants to Continue to Exist, It Must Uproot Hamas from Gaza

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On October 7, 2023, Israeli deterrence completely collapsed. As a result of a surprise attack by Hamas, Israel suffered a severe defeat in terms of casualties and property losses. The enemy infiltrated Israeli territory, captured cities and towns, decimated their populations, and held them for many hours. The only way to turn this achievement by Hamas into a pointless endeavor is for Israel to dismantle the Hamas regime in Gaza and destroy its military capabilities. This is for two reasons. First, in order to ensure the safe return of Israeli citizens to the Gaza periphery, the threat must be removed completely and their sense of security fully restored. Secondly, an end to the war without the destruction of the Hamas regime in Gaza would be considered a success for the terrorist regime and serve as a model and inspiration for other actors in the radical axis who seek the elimination of Israel.

A decade ago, in 2013, I published an article with Professor Ephraim Inbar entitled "Mowing the Grass." In it, we explained the Israeli rationale behind various rounds of conflict in Gaza. We discussed the lack of a better alternative to ground incursions into Gaza, despite the significant losses and harsh international criticism involved. There are never good alternatives in the Middle East conflict, and we argued that regular rounds in which Israel targets enemy capabilities, shows its determination to use force, and exacts a heavy price, thereby

reestablishing deterrence, provided a sufficient course of action at that stage of the ongoing conflict, which had no foreseeable resolution and had to be managed.

The events of October 7, 2023, mark a significant departure from the “Mowing the Grass” strategy and the limited-round approach against adversaries like Hamas in Gaza. There are voices that do not understand this change. For example, well-known Jewish-American columnist Thomas Friedman argued in an article in *The New York Times* on October 16 that Israel should not enter Gaza due to the likelihood of instability there and the fact that groups like Hamas, with its deep religious and ideological roots, cannot be completely uprooted. What should be done, then? Well, Mr. Friedman, writing from the safety of his home in the United States, has no answer. “I don't know,” he writes. But we need to stop the fighting and think about alternatives, he instructs us.

In stark contrast to what Friedman believes, in the Middle East, there is no place for the weak. Israel has attempted to reach agreements with Hamas, all of which disintegrated because they made Israel appear weak. Deterrence has completely collapsed, and Hamas allowed itself to embark on an immensely vicious and destructive campaign against Israel precisely because it knew people like Friedman would inevitably press Israel not to react to unspeakable provocation.

Hamas couldn't care less what the consequences of its attack on Israel will be on the Gazan population. Indeed, their suffering serves their interests. The only thing that threatens Hamas is the destruction of its military capabilities and the loss of its control over Gaza. Israel has an urgent necessity – indeed, a survival imperative – to destroy Hamas's military capabilities and bring about the collapse of its authority in Gaza.

It is important to understand the broader implications of this statement.

First of all, some things will not change. The principle of deterrence was, and will continue to be, the most central and fundamental principle in the Israeli security perception. The basic geostrategic situation in the Middle East will not change after the war, even if Israel achieves all the war's objectives. Israel cannot decisively defeat all its enemies and bring them to the point where they will cease to fight, as occurred at the end of World War II.

Throughout the history of the State of Israel, the meaning of the principle of deterrence was the removal of an immediate threat to the country and the exacting

of a heavy price from the other side to restore and gradually strengthen deterrence (“cumulative deterrence”). For example, in the Six-Day War, the government decided to take “military action that would liberate Israel from the strengthening and surrounding threat.” This directive was translated into the IDF’s mission: “The IDF will destroy the Egyptian Air Force and most of the enemy’s forces in the Sinai.” As Israel is not capable of defeating or entirely subduing nations, states, and organizations, it was understood that it would have to live by the sword for many years (this is the idea of the “Iron Wall,” as formulated by Ze’ev Jabotinsky in 1923). Therefore, the Israeli goal was and will continue to be to deter its enemies in order to increase the intervals between wars and, in general, try to avoid them as much as possible.

On October 7, Israeli deterrence (and warning) against Hamas completely failed.

As a result of the over-reliance on deterrence (and warning), Israel suffered a severe defeat in terms of casualties and property losses. The enemy penetrated its territory, captured its cities and towns, decimated their populations, committed grotesque acts of inhuman savagery on many Israeli civilians and soldiers, and held the towns for a significant number of hours. While security forces managed to regain control of the territory, that achievement was not sufficient to restore deterrence. Even a severe bombing of Gaza is not enough. From Hamas’s perspective (as well as that of the resistance axis and parts of the Arab and Muslim world in general), the suffering of Gaza’s residents is a small price to pay for the historic achievement that Hamas has obtained in their name.

Hamas is a religious-political movement that is likely impossible to completely eradicate, but it can be significantly reduced in terms of the threat it poses in specific locations such as Gaza. The only thing that truly threatens and deters Hamas is the loss of its control over Gaza and the loss of its military assets there. The two are closely linked because its military assets ensure its internal control.

But a more significant point must be understood. Hamas has achieved one of the most significant accomplishments in Arab resistance against the Zionist project since the fall of Gush Etzion and the Old City of Jerusalem at the hands of the Jordanians, accompanied by the expulsion of their Jewish inhabitants and the killing of some of them by Palestinian Arabs. This achievement is more significant than the gains made during the Egyptian-Syrian combined attack in October 1973. However briefly, Hamas succeeded in claiming several cities and towns inside the

State of Israel that were inhabited by Jews, and conducted brutal massacres of those Jews on a par with the worst carnage inflicted on Jews since the Holocaust. In so doing, it has significantly undermined the sense of security of Jewish Israelis.

The implication is clear and challenging. If the threat in Gaza is not removed when the war ends, the residents of the border areas will not return to their homes, and this may apply to other residents of Israel as well. Due to the shock of Hamas's achievement, Israel was forced to evacuate Lebanese border settlements, despite the relatively low level of conflict in that area compared to what happened at the Gaza border. For the first time since the establishment of the state, Arab resistance led to the displacement of Jews from areas within Israel's sovereign territory, and it might even be permanent. This is an unprecedented achievement for Israel's enemies.

In Israel and among the Jewish diaspora, there are people who wonder if Israel can continue to exist under such circumstances.

Many compare what happened on October 7, 2023 to the events of October 6, 1973. I would like to offer another comparison. Consider June 5, 1967: the outbreak of the Six-Day War. Before that war, Israelis felt a growing sense of encirclement as Arab armies massed on their borders. Many feared it might be the end of Israel. Israel's decisive victory in that war, in which the IDF defeated Arab armies, not only prevented further rounds of conflict but also sent a clear message that Israel was a strong nation that would exact a heavy price from those who rose against it. This restored a sense of security for Israelis and the world alike.

There are several clear reasons to defeat Hamas completely.

First, in order to ensure the return of Israeli citizens to their homes, the threat must be completely removed and their sense of security restored.

Secondly, if Israel were to end the war without destroying the Hamas regime in Gaza and its military capabilities, it would be seen as a success for Hamas. This would serve as a model and inspiration for other radical actors in the region who seek the elimination of Israel.

There is another important consideration. Israel's weakness could also affect the emerging relationships between Israel and the moderate Arab states that had come to the conclusion that Israel is an established "finished product" in the Middle

East, a strong and advanced country that it is better to befriend than to fight against. The peace agreements Israel has achieved did not result from revolutions but from this recognition. The eradication of the Hamas threat is therefore not solely about Israel's immediate security but also about regional stability and the perception of Israel in the broader Middle East.

All eyes are now on Israel. If Israel can defeat Hamas and dismantle its military capabilities, it will prove its ability to deliver the only punishment possible for the destruction of deterrence. The cost of such an operation against Israel must be clear to everyone: the destruction of the organization or regime that committed the attack. Israel, for its part, can begin the process of rehabilitating the communities around the Gaza Strip, ensuring a reasonable level of security for its residents. (Acts of terror will always occur.)

It is important to emphasize once again that not only Israel's adversaries but also those regional actors who have reconciled with Israel are watching the outcome. They had certain assumptions about Israel's military strength and capabilities. As noted, there is no room in the Middle East for weakness. This war might not be existential in the immediate sense of a threat to conquer all of Israel's territory, but it is certainly existential in the long-term sense of proving Israel's ability to continue to exist in this region. The powerful Israeli cliff was hit by a tsunami. If Israel does not demonstrate a determination to rebuild and strengthen the foundations of the cliff, it may crumble.

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