

## The Five Wars of Israel

# IDEAS



XXXI

By Rafael Bardaji







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Since October 7, 2023 — the day Hamas launched its most successful attack against Israel — the government in Jerusalem has had to wage, simultaneously, five wars: one against its direct enemies, from Hamas to Iran, including Hezbollah, Syria, Iraq, and the Houthis of Yemen; the second, against its supposed allies, from Biden's United States to the European governments, who have sought to tie Israel's hands and restrict its freedom of action; the third, of a strategic nature, between the political leadership and the commanders of the IDF, who have been at best reluctant to achieve the military objectives established by the government; the fourth, of a domestic character, essentially between the Prime Minister and an opposition that finds itself impotent and devoid of influence, and that has not hesitated to use the families of those kidnapped by Hamas and Islamic Jihad to pursue its political goals — namely, the removal of Benjamin Netanyahu from power; and, finally, the fifth, against a global campaign of delegitimization, largely the product of Hamas's propaganda success and the world's utter disinterest in knowing the truth about the conflict.

Without taking into account all these overlapping wars, it is impossible to understand the true challenge Israel has been facing, the positions of its government, and the trials that still lie ahead — whether there is a peace plan for Gaza or not.

## **I. The Defense of Israel Against the “Ring of Fire”**

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In these days of rampant antisemitism, it is worth remembering that on October 6, 2023 — and on the 5th, 4th, and 3rd as well — Israel was at peace. Its people felt safe, and its soldiers were packing up their personal belongings to go on leave and celebrate the Jewish festival of Simchat Torah, which that year also fell on a Saturday, the weekly day of rest. In Gaza, some limited military operations had been carried out over the previous ten years to “restore deterrence,” but with money flowing in from Qatar, it was widely believed that Hamas had become a responsible force, more interested in the welfare of Gazans than in its founding objective of destroying Israel. Thousands of young people were celebrating life at a music festival just a few meters from the Gaza Strip, because no one could imagine that it would become the massacre it ultimately was.

That fragile sense of tranquility was shattered — not by Israel, but by Hamas’s elaborate plan to invade Israel, to kill as many Jews as possible, regardless of age, gender, or condition; to employ an unparalleled brutality, a stark display of hatred; to loot and plunder; and, above all, to kidnap as many Israelis as possible, both alive and dead. This plan was executed in the early hours of Saturday, October 7, 2023. It began with the launch of more than five thousand rockets against Israel, followed by the incursion of thousands of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants into Israeli territory, accompanied by thousands of civilians who, together, carried out the largest massacre of Jews in a single day since the Holocaust, subjected their victims to unspeakable suffering, and dragged 253 Israelis back to Gaza in an act of challenge and provocation.

What happened afterward is relatively well known and does not need to be repeated here. Suffice it to say that before Israel could organize a retaliatory action against Hamas or attempt to rescue its citizens, Hezbollah began firing rockets from southern Lebanon, threatening to open a new front “in solidarity with our brothers in Gaza.” More surprisingly, thousands of Muslims in the main cities of the Western world — supported by much of the political left — marched defiantly, calling for the extermination of the Jews and the destruction of Israel under the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

While all this was happening, the Israeli government publicly announced its three strategic objectives for Gaza: the liberation of all hostages held by Hamas; the elimination, once and for all, of the military threat from Gaza;

and the dismantling of Hamas's authority and government in the Strip as a prerequisite for any future peace. How to achieve these goals was the task of the planners within the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces, but it was already clear that this time the use of air power alone would not suffice, and that a ground invasion would be necessary. That offensive began on October 28.

I was able to visit Israel a few weeks after the October 7 attack, and what I found — besides a nation devastated and in shock — was a country unable to comprehend how not only the attack but the ensuing horror had been possible. I also found a complex military situation, with commanders simultaneously trying to determine who bore responsibility for failing to detect Hamas's preparations and leading ongoing operations to break its defenses in Gaza.

On a subsequent visit, at the beginning of December, I could also sense the frustration that Hamas had not yet “surrendered,” despite the intense bombardments and several weeks of ground campaign. It was as if, for some within Israel's security establishment, October 7 had not marked a turning point in Hamas's strategy, and events would unfold as they had in previous confrontations: an exchange of bombings, a limited ground incursion, and a final ceasefire.

But the reality was very different. Hamas's new aggression marked a strategic shift that threatened to become an existential danger for Israel — not because of Hamas's military capability, but because Gaza was merely one piece on a much larger board on which a dangerous game had begun.

Years ago, Meir Dagan, then-director of Israel's foreign intelligence service, the Mossad, after I expressed my concern about Iran's internal evolution and the risks that might arise in the near future, solemnly told me: “Don't worry. Since 1979 Israel has identified Iran as an existential threat, and we act accordingly.” Whether from knowledge or foresight, he was not mistaken.

The truth is that since Khomeini's Shiite revolution, Iran has made it its mission on Earth to fight America, “the Great Satan,” and to literally wipe Israel, “the Little Satan,” off the map. It has spared no effort to achieve this. Its strategy was twofold: on the one hand, to arm itself internally with the offensive and defensive systems necessary to vitrify Israel and shield itself from retaliation (hence its constant pursuit of a nuclear arsenal and long-range ballistic missiles); and on the other, to organize and mobilize its proxies around Israel to place the Jewish state within what became known

as a “ring of fire.” To this end, Iran expelled the Americans from Lebanon in 1982 and created there an extension of its own revolutionary forces — Hezbollah; opportunistically, after the 2003 Iraq war, it sponsored various militias in that country to influence its internal evolution and to use it as a platform for attacks against its neighbors and Israel; since Hamas’s coup in Gaza, it has directly supported Islamic Jihad in the Strip, trained, armed, and financed Hamas, and its hand can be seen behind the planning of the October 7 attacks; and after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Iran became a shock force of the Assad regime through various groups directed by elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, using its territorial presence and control to create a corridor to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Geographically speaking, Iran was laying the foundations of an encirclement of Israel. Many in the Western strategic community viewed this as a defensive strategy on Tehran’s part — something like “Israel will not dare attack us if it feels threatened by Hezbollah and other forces surrounding it.” But others warned that, beyond a certain point, those same forces would be in position to attack Israel and attempt to destroy it.

That was the message I received from analysts in Israel’s military intelligence service, Aman, during meetings I held with them in February 2023. According to their — then minority — view, it was only a matter of months before Iran would close the “ring of fire” entirely and subject Israel to a direct and simultaneous threat never before seen. Unfortunately, other senior officers, including the then-head of the Southern Command (responsible for Gaza’s security perimeter), assured us — me and the other generals and admirals of the High-Level Military Group visiting Israel also at the start of 2023 — that deterrence was guaranteed and no war scenario was foreseeable. Just as they had told us in another visit back in the fall of 2021, under the Lapid-Bennett government.

## **The Neutralization of Hezbollah: Iran’s Terrorist Army in Lebanon**

I recalled these briefings from the lobby of my hotel in Tel Aviv in December of that same year, with air-raid sirens sounding because of rockets that Hamas continued to fire toward Jerusalem and central Israel. What struck me most, however, was that instead of the usual tourists who filled the rooms of my hotel — the Carlton in Tel Aviv, right by the sea — this time it was overflowing because the government had relocated there hundreds of families displaced from the north due to Hezbollah’s rocket and missile attacks.



KIRYAT SHMONA, March 27, 2024 -- Israeli security forces look at the damage after a rocket fired by Lebanon's Hezbollah in the city of Kiryat Shmona in northern Israel, March 27, 2024. Europa Press

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What had begun as a trickle of limited, short-range rockets was now becoming a direct threat to an increasingly wide area of northern Israel. To minimize potential civilian casualties, the Jerusalem government had decided to evacuate nearly one hundred thousand people. Many of them were in my hotel, having abandoned not only their homes but also their livelihoods — mostly agricultural — and with their children absent from school.

Although Hezbollah's initial response had been limited — leading many to believe that its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had no appetite for war with Israel — the number and range of rockets and missiles fired daily against Israeli soil steadily increased, reaching nearly 300 in a single day by March 2024. Civilian and military casualties, while relatively low, were constant, adding pressure on the government and the IDF to act.

That action came, after months of frustration with the bulk of Israel's military apparatus tied up in the protracted Gaza war that still had not met its objectives, through a stunning intelligence operation worthy of a James Bond film: the so-called *Operation Grim Beeper*.

On the afternoon of September 17, 2024, thousands of pagers extensively used by Hezbollah cadres for communication and command — devices that

Israeli intelligence had previously sabotaged with tiny explosive charges — were detonated remotely, killing about a dozen militants of the terrorist organization and wounding thousands more, both in Lebanon and in Syria. The following day, hundreds of walkie-talkies, also in Hezbollah's possession, exploded, again causing multiple casualties. The result was the total incapacitation of Hezbollah's communications network and the loss of thousands of its mid-level commanders.

Ten days later, on September 27, the Israeli Air Force carried out a surgical strike on a building in the southern Beirut neighborhood of Dahiya — the stronghold of the Shiite militia — beneath which one of Hezbollah's command centers was located. At that very moment, the entire top leadership of the organization was meeting there, including its leader Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed in the attack. His designated successor, Hashem Safieddine, was eliminated days later in another Israeli airstrike on Beirut. With the loss of its military and intelligence chiefs in previous months, Hezbollah had effectively been decapitated.

On October 1, Israel launched a ground offensive into southern Lebanon aimed at clearing all Hezbollah military infrastructure south of the Litani River — something that UNIFIL II was supposed to have accomplished after the 2006 war, under UN Resolution 1701, but either could not or would not do.

By late November, Benjamin Netanyahu announced a ceasefire agreement with Lebanon, effective on the 26th, under the terms of Hezbollah's withdrawal from south of the Litani, the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces to ensure Hezbollah would not return, and the progressive withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon.

Since then, the situation in the north has remained calm and stable, allowing thousands of displaced families to return home. Moreover, Hezbollah's defeat has triggered a new political dynamic in Lebanon, one that promises to escape the control of Hezbollah and Iran, and to open a new political chapter for the country.

In summary, through a brilliant and effective intelligence operation, a handful of surgical airstrikes that eliminated Hezbollah's top leadership, and a limited ground incursion, Iran's crown jewel in its external network — Hezbollah — was destroyed, stripping Iran of the backbone of its encirclement strategy against Israel.

## Eliminating the Iranian Presence in Syria

The second major component of Iran's "ring of fire" strategy around Israel — Syria — would also collapse shortly afterward. A day after Israel halted its military operations in Lebanon and signed a ceasefire with Beirut, opposition forces against the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad launched an offensive that ended abruptly and surprisingly with the fall of Damascus in less than two weeks. Assad fled to Moscow, and a new government was formed under the leadership of the former jihadist and visible head of the group *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), linked to Al Qaeda, whose nom de guerre had been Abu Mohammed al-Jolani.

It should be remembered that Syria represented, for Israel, the greatest conventional threat and the danger that, if ever pushed to the brink, Damascus might dare to use its chemical arsenal in a confrontation with Israel. The civil war that erupted in 2011 weakened the Assad regime but simultaneously opened new concerns for the government in Jerusalem — chief among them, the permanent presence of Iranian forces on Syrian soil.

In the early months of the Syrian civil war, Israel's security establishment assumed the end of the Assad dynasty and the breakup of the country were only a matter of time. Then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly declared his policy line regarding the events in Syria: Israel would provide humanitarian aid by setting up field hospitals on the Golan Heights, where any Syrians in need of medical care could be treated; it would respond to any fire directed at Israeli territory; and it would prevent the transfer or transit through Syria of any weapons bound for Hezbollah that could bring about a qualitative change in its offensive capabilities against Israel's security.

I had the opportunity to visit one of those field hospitals, and I must acknowledge the admirable work of the doctors and medical staff in treating the always horrifying wounds of the battlefield. I also witnessed retaliatory fire after a mortar shell was launched from the new al-Quneitra. And needless to say, over all those years, the Israeli Air Force conducted missions to destroy weapons shipments bound for Hezbollah, often without even entering Syrian airspace, using stand-off air-to-ground missiles instead.

However, after the Assad regime's bloody reconquest of Aleppo in 2015 with Russian help, Israel had to accept two realities: first, that Assad was not going to fall; and second — and even more significant — that a

superpower, in this case Russia, had established itself only a few dozen kilometers from Israel's borders. Without abandoning its three guiding principles, the Israeli government was forced to adjust its operational plans to account for the Russian presence in Syria. To avoid a direct confrontation with Moscow, it negotiated what became known as a "de-confliction agreement," under which Israel agreed not to strike sites where Russian forces were present and to give limited advance notice of planned air operations.

Surprisingly, the agreement worked well, allowing Israel to continue intercepting weapons shipments to Hezbollah without triggering escalation with Moscow.

That remained the case until the fall of Damascus and the sudden withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria — forces too closely tied to the regime that had just been overthrown.

As we know, al-Jolani swapped his guerrilla attire for a Western-style suit, changed his name to Ahmed al-Sharaa, and shifted his discourse to present himself as the leader of all Syrians. He announced a five-year transitional plan to return power to the Syrian people.

In Israel, as in many Western capitals, the new president was received with skepticism but also with cautious hope that he might truly be committed to his words. And it must be said that, at least so far, he has delivered. With the exception of attacks against the Druze minority — with whom Israel maintains a special relationship, as that community extends across its own borders — no major incidents or hostilities have occurred between the two countries.

In the first days following Assad's fall, Israel destroyed the main Syrian weapons stockpiles to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands, and its commando units put an end to the remaining chemical weapons depots. To stop attacks against the Druze — something attributed more to al-Sharaa's inability to impose his authority over all warring factions than to any deliberate policy from Damascus — Israel carried out limited protective actions inside Syria. None of this, however, prevented a growing diplomatic rapprochement that has now culminated in the announcement of an imminent security agreement between the two countries.

Iran, therefore, lost another of its key assets while watching its logistical highway to Hezbollah close before its eyes.

## Eliminating the Existential Threat from Iran

Although never officially acknowledged, it is well known that Israel and Iran have been engaged in a shadow war of growing intensity over the past two decades. Israel's primary objective has been to thwart Iran's nuclear program — conducted clandestinely and in violation of its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which it is a signatory — while also keeping close watch on Iran's rapid advances in long-range ballistic and cruise missile technologies. One could say that Jerusalem had chosen the path of obstructing and slowing down, by all possible covert means, Iran's military nuclear development, thus buying time for the international community to assume responsibility for stopping it.

Between 2010 and 2020, several top scientists directly connected to Iran's nuclear program were assassinated inside Iran. Perhaps the most notorious of these was the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, chief scientist of the program, in late November 2020, during an ambush on the outskirts of Tehran — a case surrounded by speculation, with theories ranging from remote-controlled weapons to on-site commandos or car bombs.

Iran, for its part, launched numerous cyberattacks against Israel throughout this period. According to a Google report, before 2025 Iran was responsible for more than 80 percent of all cyber activity directed against Israel.

Until recently, neither side had dared to cross the threshold of this shadow war by claiming or executing a direct, open strike against the other. That was about to change in 2024.

In the context of the war in Gaza and the growing Iranian threat encircling Israel, on April 1, 2024, the Israeli Air Force carried out a surgical strike on a building adjacent to the Iranian consulate in Damascus — a facility used by elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its elite Quds Force as a command center.

It was not the first Israeli attack targeting high-ranking Iranian officers. In December 2023, a precision strike in Damascus had already killed Sayyed Razi Mousavi, a senior Quds Force commander, as well as the head of Iranian military intelligence in Syria, General Sadegh Omidzadeh, in another air raid on January 20, 2024.

However, the April 2024 strike against the annex of the Iranian consulate — where, among others, Mohammad Reza Zahedi, leader of the Revolutionary

Guard, former head of Iran's aerospace force, and at the time commander of the Quds Force, was killed — prompted Tehran to change its tactics.

On the night of Saturday, April 13, after several days of mounting warnings suggesting an imminent Iranian retaliation against Israeli territory, alarms sounded across Israel as radar detected the launch of numerous Iranian drones headed toward the country. That was only the first wave.

I happened to be in Israel that week and remember stepping out onto my balcony to scan the sky, trying to grasp the magnitude of the threat approaching us. Minutes later, dozens of cruise missiles were detected, expected to reach Israel in under two hours. Shortly afterward, alerts came in reporting the launch of more than a hundred ballistic missiles that, if not intercepted by Israel's defense systems, would impact within minutes. Theoretically, it was time to follow the Civil Defense Command's instructions and head to the shelter — in my case, the hotel basement.

Thanks to cooperation from allied forces — those of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan — most of the drones and cruise missiles were shot down in midair before entering Israeli airspace. The ballistic missiles were almost entirely intercepted by Israel's *David's Sling* and *Arrow 3* defense systems, with only minimal damage caused by the few that managed to strike. At the same time, Hezbollah launched its own volley of rockets against northern Israel.

This first direct Iranian attack produced evaluations as surprising as they were contradictory. While some declared it a failure — having failed to achieve its intended level of destruction and having exposed significant weaknesses in Iran's offensive capabilities — many analysts emphasized that Israel's and the West's deterrence had failed to prevent the attack altogether. Al Jazeera, in an act of self-congratulation, even claimed that Iran had emerged strengthened throughout the region. We now know that was not true — and that it may have led to a fatal self-deception among Iran's ruling ayatollahs.

As usual, Western media quickly began speculating about an “out-of-control” Israeli retaliation that could trigger a regional war, but the truth is that Israel was already planning limited but strategically significant actions — steps that could pave the way for a broader intervention against Iran's nuclear program if necessary, showing remarkable strategic vision under difficult circumstances. At least that was my impression after several meetings with members of Israel's security cabinet.

Israel's response came at dawn on April 19, with a combined drone and missile attack targeting Iran, Syria, and Iraq. At the time, it was widely interpreted as a largely symbolic strike meant to send the message that Israel could reach Tehran if it wished. We now know, however, that the targets were strategic, hitting Iranian air-defense systems and several secret nuclear installations.

Because both Iran's "True Promise" attack on April 14 and Israel's counters-trike on April 19 produced no further escalation, the importance of these events was largely overlooked by the international press.

Tehran officially named its April 14 attack "True Promise," and launched "True Promise II" on October 1, 2024, this time as retaliation for the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in an attack on a Revolutionary Guard compound during his visit to Iran on July 31, as well as for the deaths of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Revolutionary Guard operations chief General Abbas Nilforoushan in Beirut on September 27.

"True Promise II" consisted of the launch of nearly 200 ballistic missiles on the night of October 1, 2024. Iran boasted that it had used its supposedly hypersonic *Fattah* missiles and caused major damage to Israel. The reality was quite different: the majority of missiles were intercepted in flight, with only a few making direct hits — on barracks at Nevatim Air Base, a school in Gedera, and a restaurant in Tel Aviv — resulting in two Israeli fatalities and one Palestinian killed in Jericho when a missile fragment struck him. Despite Iran's attempt to overwhelm Israel's defenses with more advanced missiles, it failed to achieve any significant military results.

Israel's response came during the night of October 26. With more than 100 aircraft mobilized — including bombers, fighter escorts, electronic warfare planes, tankers, and rescue teams — Israel carried out several hours of airstrikes targeting Iranian air-defense installations, nuclear-related facilities, drone and missile factories, and command centers controlling Iran's advanced SAM-300 surface-to-air missile systems — the most sophisticated in the Iranian arsenal. As we now know, Israel was in fact securing a clear aerial corridor for potential future operations against Iran.

Because Israel refrained from striking Iran's energy infrastructure and from directly targeting political or military leaders, many observers failed to grasp the strategic advantage gained from the attack. This was largely due to the West's prevailing reluctance to acknowledge that military success — even victory — is still possible, and can sometimes yield positive consequences beyond the battlefield.

Nonetheless, Iran's leadership, from the Supreme Leader down, continued its triumphalist rhetoric, issuing ever more bellicose threats against Israel — blind to the reality that such posturing could lead them to disaster. One lesson Western intelligence services have drawn from this Iran–Israel duel is the extent of self-delusion to which autocrats and dictators are prone, perched atop corrupt systems that distort truth at every level.

With the arrival of Donald Trump at the White House and the almost complete operational freedom he granted to Israel's armed forces, an attack on Iran's nuclear program became a matter of time. It is true that the new American president always preferred to achieve his goals through negotiation and, to that end, sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, proposing to open new talks with the aim of reaching an agreement to end the military dimension of Iran's nuclear program. The letter, sent in early March 2025, allowed two months to reach such an accord.

During Joe Biden's administration, Iran had accelerated its uranium-enrichment program and already possessed enough 60-percent enriched uranium to produce half a dozen atomic bombs within a few weeks, if it chose to do so. Donald Trump considered this situation unacceptable.

After Iran's usual delaying tactics — Khamenei rejecting the conditions outlined in Trump's letter, while his foreign minister publicly feigned interest in studying and modifying the proposal — the first round of talks took place in Oman on April 12. Although both sides issued cautiously positive statements afterward, Tehran refused to admit publicly that it was negotiating directly with Washington. Even so, a second round was held in Rome a week later and a third once again in Oman at the end of April. The Iranians proposed holding weekly meetings, citing the technical complexity of the issue, though it was clear their intention was to stall the countdown of the 60-day period that Trump had set, starting from the first meeting and expiring on June 11.

In parallel, the United States and Israel jointly launched a disinformation campaign that deserves to be studied in every war and intelligence academy for its effectiveness and success. Both the American president's and the Israeli prime minister's inner circles subtly hinted at serious disagreements over what could be considered an acceptable deal. The media, ever eager to drive a wedge between the two allies, eagerly amplified reports of a supposed rift between Trump and Netanyahu — contrary to the reality behind closed doors. Ministerial delegations and senior military officials,

including Israel's Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and the head of the Mossad, made trips to Washington or met with Trump's negotiators, ostensibly expressing fears of a "bad deal" and trying, without much success, to influence the talks. All of this was designed to convince Iran that Trump would not authorize an Israeli strike.

The truth, however, was quite different. Concerned not only about the pace of Iran's nuclear program but, above all, about its growing capacity to produce new-generation ballistic missiles — whose sheer numbers could overwhelm Israel's defenses within two years if nothing were done — Jerusalem had already decided to destroy Iran's main nuclear and missile facilities by the time Trump was preparing his letter to Khamenei. Whether the negotiations might have succeeded — a remote possibility given Iran's lack of sincerity and cooperation — no one can say; but what is certain is that Donald Trump was determined to do two things: prevent Iran from acquiring the bomb by any means, and give Israel full freedom of action once it concluded that no alternative remained.

The existence of ongoing talks, coupled with the reluctance of certain senior Trump administration officials — and some of his more isolationist supporters in the media — who opposed American involvement in another Middle Eastern conflict, led many to believe that Trump would restrain Netanyahu and that the Israeli leader would not dare defy his main ally. But the reality of their relationship, which we now know was much stronger than anyone imagined, was quite different. The question was never whether Trump would give Israel the green light, but whether he would join militarily once Israel struck.

Discussing this scenario with a close friend — an Israeli minister and member of the security cabinet — we reached the same conclusion in his Jerusalem office: Trump would send in American bombers, and perhaps more, under two possible circumstances — if Israel were doing extremely well in its strike, as a final flourish; or if Israel were doing disastrously and Iran launched such a massive missile barrage that the country's survival was at stake. In that case, Trump would "send in the cavalry."

Fortunately, as we now know, the latter proved unnecessary.

On June 13, Israel launched a limited but lethal attack on Iran, striking simultaneously its principal uranium-conversion and enrichment sites, missile and drone factories and depots, facilities integrating nuclear-capable warheads with ballistic missiles, command centers of the Revolutionary Guard,

and, with Mossad's assistance, key military leaders of the regime and top scientists linked to the nuclear weapons program. In less than two hours, the Revolutionary Guard's command structure and the nuclear program had been decapitated. By around 6 a.m., after five attack waves, about thirty critical installations had been hit and rendered inoperative. By the end of the day, more than one hundred targets had been destroyed, while Mossad agents operating from drone bases inside Iran continued striking launchers for drones and missiles, severely degrading Tehran's capacity for retaliation. The operation, codenamed *Lion Rising*, continued for twelve days.

Iran responded immediately, launching drones on June 13 and, by the next day, adding ballistic missiles, subjecting Israel to an intense barrage of rockets and suicide drones. Approximately 500 ballistic missiles and over 1,000 suicide drones were fired from Iran. It is estimated that about 87 percent of the ballistic missiles were intercepted by Israel's defenses. Even so, roughly 65 managed to hit their targets, causing severe damage. The Weizmann Institute, a world-renowned scientific institution, was struck by one or more missiles, resulting in the total destruction of much of its facilities and archives; the Haifa port refinery was also hit, leaving it inoperative for several weeks. Twenty-eight Israelis were killed, and more than 3,200 were wounded during the twelve days of open warfare. Israeli airspace had to be closed to commercial traffic, causing major economic disruption and leaving nearly one hundred thousand Israelis stranded abroad, unable to return home.

Given that the penetration rate of Iranian missiles in the first days did not exceed 8 percent of all launches — but later rose to 14 percent as Iran adjusted its tactics and deployed newer missiles — it is easy to understand Israel's deep concern about a future scenario in which Iran could fire thousands of missiles at the small Jewish state. And hence its determination to prevent it — especially knowing that, in a not-so-distant future, dozens of those missiles could be nuclear-armed.

It is also worth emphasizing the difficulty of combating mobile missile launchers. The same challenge faced U.S. forces during the First Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein began firing missiles at Israel, has once again confronted the IDF.

Commentators — many inclined toward defeatism — wondered whether Israel could truly inflict irreversible damage on Iran's nuclear program, given that facilities such as Natanz and especially Fordow were heavily fortified or buried deep beneath mountains of rock. And, since the massive

“bunker buster” bombs capable of reaching them were in the hands of the U.S. Air Force alone, success seemed doubtful.

That doubt was dispelled on the night of June 22, ten days after the launch of Israel's *Rising Lion* operation. President Trump had authorized the deployment of B-2 Spirit strategic bombers to strike Iran's key nuclear sites at Isfahan, Natanz, and Fordow. That night, twelve GBU-57A/B bunker-buster bombs were dropped on Fordow through its ventilation shafts to reach the uranium-enrichment halls, while two more hit Natanz, already severely damaged by Israel's air raids. Cruise missiles launched from a submarine — likely the USS *Georgia* — also struck Natanz and Isfahan.

Although it was night in Iran, it was still early evening in Washington, D.C., where I happened to be for meetings with the administration's Middle East team. News of the strikes spread like wildfire. Anti-Trump media outlets accused the president of opening the gates of apocalypse, expecting an overwhelming and deadly Iranian response. But that response, when it came the next day, consisted of a token volley of about a dozen missiles fired at U.S. bases in Qatar and Iraq — announced in advance and, with personnel evacuated, causing no significant damage. Far from Armageddon, the result was Iran's capitulation in the form of accepting a ceasefire the following day, June 25 — ending what Trump himself called on his social network “the Twelve-Day War.”

Once again, Trump's critics denounced his decision, claiming that the attacks had been ineffective and predicting that Iran would redouble its efforts to rebuild its nuclear program in the coming months. But, as so often before, journalists and “experts” were wrong. Satellite imagery and intelligence assessments told a very different story.



El presidente de Estados Unidos, Donald Trump, y el vicepresidente JD Vance, escuchan al primer ministro de Israel, Benjamín Netanyahu en el Despacho Oval de la Casa Blanca. Fotografía: Avi Ohayon/GPO/dpa. Fuente: Europapress

During a subsequent visit to Israel to discuss precisely this issue — the effectiveness of the strikes, the extent of the damage inflicted, and what could now be expected from Iran — I began with a notable degree of skepticism but left quite convinced, based on the information presented to me, of the irreparable blow dealt to Iran's nuclear and missile programs. Hundreds of thousands of centrifuges at Natanz and Fordow destroyed or rendered inoperable, beyond repair or recovery; enriched uranium hexafluoride buried under rubble and unusable; the scientific brains behind the program eliminated; uranium-conversion facilities obliterated and impossible to rebuild without direct Chinese assistance; more than 60 percent of Iran's missile-production capacity wiped out.

And to all that must be added Iran's diplomatic isolation and the reinstatement by the United Nations of the so-called "snapback sanctions," which will make obtaining materials and components for its military programs exponentially more difficult.

Still, triumphalism must be avoided. It is true that Iran has revealed itself to be a paper tiger — a fact that will have major political repercussions across the region, especially now that its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq have been severely weakened. But one cannot forget that, if the ayatollahs possess anything, it is strategic patience. Unless a regime change ends the current theocratic and fundamentalist state, we can expect them to do everything in their power to rebuild the capabilities that support their vision of regional hegemony and revolutionary ambition on a global scale.

It is likely that Iran's nuclear program has been buried for the foreseeable future, beyond revival. Yet that does not mean Iran will abandon its goal of producing ballistic missiles in sufficient number and sophistication to threaten its neighbors. Hence, Israeli planners must prepare for a future in which Israel and Iran compete for supremacy in the eternal duel between shield and sword — or, in other words, a technological arms race with no clear end.

For now, however, Iran's existential threat to Israel has evaporated — thanks to the combined military actions of Israel and the United States.

## II. The Danger of Friendly Fire

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At the beginning of December 2023, I had the opportunity to visit an armored company operating in northern Gaza. Having closely followed the war in Ukraine, I was fully aware of how voracious modern, high-intensity conflicts are in their consumption of ammunition. Gaza, at least in its initial phase, could not be very different. The ground offensive had only just begun a few days earlier, and artillery and tanks, with their precision shells, were playing a decisive role.

What I was not aware of at the time was the industrial weakness in replenishing munitions systems. On the one hand, there were the defensive systems, particularly the *Iron Dome* interceptors, whose stockpiles were being depleted at an alarming rate given the intensity of Hamas's rocket fire. On the other hand, there were conventional munitions — especially 105mm and 155mm artillery shells.

The war in Gaza erupted at a moment when the Western world's effort to supply Ukraine had almost completely emptied global ammunition reserves, including those of the United States. In fact, in January 2023, hundreds of thousands of U.S. Army shells that had been stored in Israel were shipped to Ukraine to sustain that country's intense artillery duel with Russia. The Lapid-Bennett government, which had been informed by American authorities of this diversion of munitions, gave its approval, considering that Israel faced no foreseeable scenario in which it would need to access those reserves — another example of the blindness of Israel's political and security establishment to what was already being prepared against them.

Meanwhile, Europe's main munitions factories could barely keep up with Ukraine's needs. It is enough to recall that, by the end of 2022, Ukraine was consuming in a single week what the entire European defense industry could produce in a month, at best.

The war in Gaza — unlike previous military operations in the Strip, this time threatening to drag on indefinitely — placed Israel's defense forces in a difficult position regarding the operational tempo. Less ammunition meant fewer shots fired and, therefore, reduced offensive power.

Worse still, Israel's extreme dependence on foreign markets — particularly on the United States, its habitual supplier — made it vulnerable to political and diplomatic pressure, as Washington and others used the threat of

reducing, delaying, or outright cutting off certain weapons deliveries to force Jerusalem to comply with their demands.

The Biden administration became a clear example of this “carrot and stick” game with the Israeli government. While publicly declaring full support for Israel, Washington did not hesitate to use blackmail when events failed to unfold according to its preferences. Thus, in the spring of 2024, senior members of the Biden administration began talking about “pausing” the delivery of certain materials to Israel, claiming that civilian casualties in Gaza were too high. Later, when the Gazan population had been evacuated to the southwestern area of the Strip, President Biden announced that he would not approve the shipment of 2,000-pound bombs, fearing they might be used in the assault on Rafah. To cite just two examples.

Subsequently, amid media accusations that Israel was blocking humanitarian aid deliveries, the United States again threatened to cut off arms transfers unless Jerusalem allowed in more aid trucks. This, it should be noted, never actually happened — mainly because legal advisors at the Pentagon and the State Department determined that Israel was not in breach of its obligations on this issue.

In any case, the reality was that Israel was being diplomatically exposed — publicly accused without evidence, and, worse still, pressured to reconsider its military course toward Hamas.

Concern for civilian casualties in any armed conflict is understandable. But I sincerely doubt that Washington’s decision-makers were motivated solely by humanitarian considerations. Unjustly ignored was the enormous difficulty of fighting in such a densely populated urban environment as Gaza. This was not a “normal” battlefield. Nor was it fair to overlook the extraordinary efforts of the Israeli military to minimize civilian losses in a confrontation where there is no clear distinction between combatants and non-combatants — apart from the presence or absence of a weapon or explosive.

Since *Operation Protective Edge*, I have had the opportunity to coordinate a group of generals and admirals — all former chiefs of staff or operations — from more than a dozen countries, ranging from India to Colombia, including many in Europe and North America. We have reported in detail on the complex methods employed by the IDF to warn civilians to evacuate areas designated as legitimate targets, as well as on their decision-making processes regarding whether to proceed with an attack when there is suspicion of civilian presence nearby.

The High-Level Military Group, which I have accompanied in its missions analyzing IDF operations in Gaza — sometimes descending into tunnels crossing from Gaza into Israel, or entering the Strip itself alongside Israeli units to observe operations firsthand — has always concluded that, if Western armies were held to the same standards, they would never be able to wage war. Many of the accusations leveled against Israel — of “disproportionality” or “cruelty” — are the result of ignorance or, worse, of deliberate delegitimization efforts by Israel’s enemies seeking to undermine its right to exist. Nor does anyone mention that humanitarian aid continued to flow thanks to Israel itself — a demand never before made of any nation at war: to supply fuel, water, and food to its enemy.

By willfully ignoring all these critical aspects of the Gaza conflict, the Biden administration was feeding an international campaign against the State of Israel — a campaign whose real aim was not to protect civilians, but to save Hamas from certain defeat and to promote a vision of a region “without Israel,” that is, a full-fledged campaign of ethnic cleansing orchestrated by Hamas’s networks, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Western left.

The reasons behind this American stance will have to be determined by future historians. But it is clear that for the Biden administration, an open-ended war in Gaza — with Iran as an indirect actor — stood in the way of its obsession with reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement that Barack Obama had signed and which Donald Trump later abandoned during his first term.

In any case, the United States was not alone in criticizing Israel. The Europeans — so dependent on Biden for the Ukraine war — were not far behind. As is typical of those deeply pacifist in nature and utterly ignorant of what war truly entails, European leaders quickly began calling for “proportionality.” These voices gradually grew more radical, frustrated by their impotence to influence Israel’s government in the slightest, until they echoed the chants of radical Islamists: *“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”* In other words, the total destruction of Israel.

The most extreme example of this trend was the socialist-communist coalition government of Spain, led by its ultra-leftist prime minister Pedro Sánchez — capable even of approving an arms embargo on Israel on the very day marking the second anniversary of Hamas’s pogrom.

Three European leaders — or rather, politicians, for “leaders” they are not — have been the most determined in showing their opposition to the Israeli government and in pushing for a ceasefire at any cost, whether or not it

meant the return of the hostages: France's Emmanuel Macron, the United Kingdom's Keir Starmer, and Spain's Pedro Sánchez. And alongside them, the officials of the European Union, ever critical of Israel.

There are many reasons for Europe's deep-seated anti-Israel sentiment, but they can be summarized in three. First, Israel “betrayed” the left that once supported its founding by abandoning socialism in favor of the “savage capitalism” of the United States. Second, Israel represents the national expression of a people whose identity is rooted in religion — it is the Jewish state — which clashes head-on with the hyper-secularism of the European elites. And third, Israel is willing to defend itself, to kill and to die in order to preserve its existence and identity — not just its prosperity and freedom. In a Europe that is institutionally and sociologically pacifist, Israel's warrior spirit is simply intolerable.

Europe's underlying problem has worsened with Donald Trump's return to the White House. Alienated and confused by a president they neither understand nor control, Europe's leaders have responded by radicalizing their rhetoric and distancing themselves even further from America. Thus, while under Biden in 2024 they maintained a cautious distance and kept their attention on Russia and their own continent, in 2025 they descended into a frantic race to see who could recognize the State of Palestine first — regardless of realities on the ground in Gaza.

Their supposed justification was to pressure Israel into ending the war quickly. In truth, it was a reaction to Trump's alignment with Jerusalem — and, perhaps even more cynically, a political tactic to mask their own domestic weakness.

If these three leaders share one trait, it is their unpopularity, their inability to pass legislation or advance their agendas, and their desperate attempt to cling to power by waving the Palestinian flag as an electoral distraction. In Spain, the prime minister faces multiple corruption investigations and seeks to steal votes from the communists at any cost; in France and the United Kingdom, Macron and Starmer are motivated by fear of the violent unrest that their growing Muslim populations might unleash.

Whether through ignorance, political stupidity, or sheer malice, these leaders have achieved neither peace in Gaza, nor prevented an Israeli-American strike on Iran, nor persuaded the Arab world, nor laid the foundations for a Palestinian state. Sadly — and history will judge them for it — the only thing they have accomplished is to feed a monster that is

not merely anti-Israel but openly antisemitic. They have allowed Islamist mobs to seize Europe's streets — though not, tellingly, the Arab streets — reviving the ancient European plague of Jew-hatred. If this continues, it will convince many Jews that they have no future in these countries — or in much of Europe at all.

Cloaked in hollow moral grandstanding, these politicians have cynically played with the hopes of the Palestinians and the future of Israelis and European Jews alike, so long as it made them look good in the media, artificially boosted their popularity, and bought them another day in power.

By posturing as Israel's judges, they have delivered old Europe into the hands of Islamist theocrats and totalitarian forces. In trying to defeat Israel, they have lost their battle with Trump, will lose it with Putin, and are ultimately condemning Western civilization on the continent. All of this wrapped, of course, in pious words about the “suffering of the Palestinian people,” the “abandonment of the Israeli hostages,” and the illusion that they remain relevant in a region where they are neither relevant nor respected.

Now, following their recognition of the so-called State of Palestine — one more fiction announced at the annual assembly of UN autocrats — some claim that Israel has never been more isolated. In reality, it is these European leaders who have never been more alone: alienated from the only real power, the American president; at odds with Europe's most important government, Germany; and disregarded by the Arab world, which wisely follows the American lead.

Even so, there is a strategic lesson here for Israel: friends come and go, while enemies accumulate. Israel is today militarily stronger than ever, but it must not forget how easily it could be strangled if the occupant of the White House were to change — whether in person or in policy. The next Israeli government, emerging from elections next year, will face an essential task: not only to replenish ammunition stockpiles, but to launch an industrialization plan capable of meeting its most urgent defense needs.

### **III. Politicians and Soldiers: The War of Attrition**

My first meetings with senior Israeli military officers took place in early November 2023, just a few days after the start of the ground offensive in Gaza. I must confess that my overall impression was rather discouraging. On the one hand, the shock of October 7 was still very much alive — a heavy psychological burden that forced everyone to focus on finding something, some viable and effective course of action. On the other hand, the specter of guilt — over having failed to anticipate Hamas’s attack, over not having foreseen such cruelty from the Palestinians, and over being unable to react more swiftly — hung over the IDF headquarters like a dense fog. The need to concentrate on ongoing operations did not erase the persistent thoughts of what had gone wrong and who was to blame for the tragedy. And third, there was a pervasive pessimism: after a month of bombardments and a few days of ground fighting, Hamas — unlike in previous occasions — not only refused to surrender but continued to resist fiercely. Casualties were beginning to mount, and although still well below what earlier studies and plans had anticipated, the fear that they would continue to rise weighed visibly on the commanders’ shoulders.

On October 25, Prime Minister Netanyahu had publicly outlined the three objectives of the war: the release of all hostages; the elimination of every military threat from the Gaza Strip; and the removal of Hamas’s government from power. The challenge lay in how to reconcile all three objectives simultaneously.

At that time, in November 2023, the families of the hostages held by Hamas were not yet as organized or politically mobilized as they would later become, but their feelings were entirely understandable: to recover their loved ones as soon as possible, even if it meant accepting a ceasefire that would make the other two goals unattainable. “We can deal with Hamas later,” was the refrain — failing to grasp that any ceasefire leaving Hamas’s military and political structure largely intact would be perceived as its victory and Israel’s defeat, emboldening all the Jewish state’s enemies, from Lebanon to Iran. Moreover, with an international community blaming Israel rather than Hamas for the conflict, Israel’s freedom of action after any truce would be minimal — except in the event of a blatant violation of its terms by Hamas. Even then, the anti-Israel bias of international institutions and many foreign ministries would ensure that Jerusalem faced diplomatic condemnation.

Despite breaking with an unwritten Israeli tradition — that the government should never engage directly with the families of hostages — Netanyahu appointed a senior official to liaise with them and opened negotiation channels with Hamas through Qatar and the United States, among others. Still, the scale of the tragedy — 251 hostages — changed Israel’s domestic dynamics entirely. The anguish of the families could not be ignored. Unfortunately, as weeks passed and the prime minister remained determined to achieve all the war’s objectives, many of those families fell under the influence of the opposition, which had grown increasingly radicalized since Netanyahu’s return to power after the November 2022 elections.

By early November, with the country still visibly in shock, what struck me most was the widening gap — one that would only grow in the following months — between the political leadership and the senior officers at the Ministry of Defense. During my meetings, I heard repeated skepticism about the feasibility of overthrowing Hamas. It was one thing, they said, to destroy its arsenals and military infrastructure to ensure that another October 7 could never happen again — but quite another to eradicate its rule in Gaza. Though they often justified their hesitation in terms of the human and temporal cost required to achieve the government’s third objective, it was clear that, beneath the surface, what truly shaped the planners’ attitude was their fear of having to administer Gaza themselves — an occupation in all but name. Without Hamas, chaos would reign in the Strip, they argued. My impression was that the military commanders preferred a weakened Hamas responsible for maintaining order in Gaza rather than having to take on that burden themselves.

Without dismissing the value of their operational and strategic assessments, to me the real problem lay in the growing dissonance between the prime minister’s language and that of the Defense Ministry. While Netanyahu used the Hebrew term *mitut*, meaning “destruction,” the ministry corridors echoed with the word *peruk*, meaning “dismantling.” To some, this might appear a subtle difference; to me, it carried deep connotations that could complicate both the direction and outcome of the war.

The most tangible manifestation of these differing mindsets was the IDF’s operational method in the ground campaign. To the surprise of General David Petraeus — the architect of the “Clear, Hold, and Build” counterinsurgency doctrine — the IDF pursued precisely the opposite approach: “Clear and Leave.” In other words, instead of remaining in the captured area to win over the local population and begin reconstruction, the Israeli forces

would clear a zone of Hamas and other Palestinian militants and, once the threat was neutralized, withdraw — retaining, of course, the ability to return later under better conditions if Hamas reappeared.

Perhaps the difference between Petraeus and General Herzl Halevi, then IDF Chief of Staff, stemmed from their respective assumptions: the American believed civilians could eventually side with counterinsurgents, while the Israelis did not believe that Palestinian “civilians” would support them against Hamas — at least not yet. We must remember that, along with the nearly two thousand terrorists who crossed into Israel on October 7, an almost equal number of civilians followed in a second wave, committing further acts of murder, looting, and destruction — all well documented by cameras.

Even so, the IDF may have underestimated Hamas’s ability to endure thanks to its tunnel network and to reoccupy territory once the army withdrew. Hence the need for repeated incursions into northern and southern Gaza. Admittedly, as predicted, those second operations were easier and less costly in lives, but they left me with a bitter impression: it was a never-ending story.

The divergence between political and military leadership also became apparent in Defense Minister Yoav Gallant’s initial preference to postpone the Gaza campaign and focus instead on what he considered the greater threat — Hezbollah in Lebanon. The IDF had repeatedly told us, during previous visits of the High-Level Military Group, that it knew how to fight that war and win it. But thanks to the prime minister’s insistence, that shift never occurred.

Over the following months, a kind of self-serving defeatism began surfacing through leaks, publicized disagreements between the defense minister — eventually dismissed in November 2024 — and the prime minister, and even public statements from certain officers. Perhaps the most surreal episode occurred on June 20, 2024, when the IDF spokesperson, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, declared on Israeli television that “Hamas is an idea that cannot be eliminated.” Though his words were meant to constrain the prime minister’s options, they were nonetheless disheartening — and unacceptable.

To me, it seemed as though Israel’s military leaders had become infected by Western military thinking, which no longer believes in victory. Wars, in that mindset, are not to be won, only managed. But such thinking can only exist among those who never have to fight wars for their very survival — and Israel is not one of them.

With the replacement of Herzl Halevi by Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir on March 5, 2025, I thought at last the IDF would fully align itself with the political leadership. His words during the ceremony in which he assumed command seemed to confirm it: “The task I receive today is clear: to lead the IDF to victory. (...) Hamas has suffered irreparable damage, but it has not yet been defeated. The mission is not yet complete.”

In the Middle East, it is always wise to retain a measure of skepticism about the future, and my optimism regarding a possible shift in Israel’s military approach had to be tempered by experience and common sense.

When I landed again at Ben Gurion Airport on September 1 of this year, I was greeted by press leaks of the previous evening’s security cabinet meeting in Jerusalem. The leaks revealed that the IDF had rejected launching an offensive on Gaza City and preferred to accept a cease-fire in exchange for the return of the hostages. With Hezbollah decapitated, Iran’s nuclear threat neutralized, and Hamas’s military power dismantled, Israel could, they argued, afford to stop its offensive if it meant recovering the hostages alive. The press, as usual, blamed the prime minister for his “stubbornness” in prolonging the war. As I told a close friend — a member of the security cabinet and a key figure in everything Israel has done since 2023 — “It seems we are back where we were a year ago.”

It is as if the military no longer believed that only by applying greater military pressure could Hamas be forced to release the hostages. Their contradiction lies in believing that Hamas’s idea of destroying Israel cannot be eradicated, while assuming that a weakened Hamas will not seek to rebuild and continue its plans at the first opportunity. The “mow the lawn” strategy used in the West Bank — striking whenever a terrorist raises his head — would, in Gaza, require near-permanent operations, inevitably wearing down Israel.

In any case, the IDF leadership failed to convince the prime minister not to launch a new offensive against Gaza City — the last bastion of Hamas, along with the so-called Central Camp, in the Strip. It is true that certain operational conditions were imposed regarding the pace of the advance and the postponement, for now, of the Central Camp operation. But, as we now know, Hamas’s eventual willingness to negotiate the return of all hostages has been due largely to the imminent prospect of its total defeat on the battlefield. And, in my humble opinion, that outcome is due solely to the determination and resolve of Benjamin Netanyahu.

In democracies, it is common for military leaders to question or resist political directives. But to do so systematically, in wartime, can only harm the war effort of the entire nation.



Israeli soldiers recover the body of a compatriot killed during an attack by Palestinian terrorists in Kfar Aza (south of the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip).

Photo: JACK GUEZ/AFP

## **IV. The Total War: Everyone Against Netanyahu**

Since the morning of October 7, 2023, Benjamin Netanyahu has been the main target of hatred for much of the Israeli opposition and, increasingly, of the Western media. On that day, both his greatest test as a statesman and the most relentless political and personal campaign against him began.

Although the Shin Bet — the Israeli internal security service — bears direct responsibility for having failed to detect Hamas’s attack preparations, and although there were also warning failures within military intelligence (AMAN) and in the Southern Command, the opposition has sought, from the very first moment, to place all blame for the tragedy on the prime minister. In a society as politically divided as Israel’s, it was inevitable that some would attempt to turn a national crisis into a political opportunity.

Criticism of Netanyahu soon shifted from domestic politics to the international arena. Western media outlets and much of the so-called progressive intelligentsia began portraying him as the embodiment of everything they despise about Israel: a hawk, a nationalist, an authoritarian, and, of course, a populist. The “Trump of the Middle East.”

From that moment on, every Israeli military action in Gaza was framed as a personal decision of Netanyahu, as if he were single-handedly waging the war for his own survival rather than for Israel’s. Any success was quickly downplayed or attributed to others; every setback, magnified and pinned directly on him.

Inside Israel, this campaign was amplified by a fragmented opposition unable to offer an alternative project, united only by its shared loathing of the man who had defeated them at the polls time and again for nearly three decades. Figures such as Yair Lapid, Benny Gantz, and Avigdor Lieberman, despite their deep mutual animosities, all found in Netanyahu’s downfall a common cause.

Meanwhile, the families of the hostages — whose suffering is beyond question — were gradually absorbed into the political struggle. Their genuine anguish was exploited and redirected toward the streets, where protests calling for the prime minister’s resignation mixed with demands for a ceasefire and banners accusing him of “abandoning” the captives.

The Israeli media, traditionally hostile toward Netanyahu, gave constant

visibility to these demonstrations, helping to forge an atmosphere of permanent siege. Ironically, this only strengthened his resolve and widened the gap between him and his opponents.

Abroad, Washington's unease with Netanyahu's government also became increasingly visible. President Biden's administration distrusted him for ideological and personal reasons alike. To the Democratic Party's left, Netanyahu represents everything detested about Israel and the American right: a conservative nationalist leader, comfortable with religious symbolism, unrepentantly pro-Western, and unwilling to submit to fashionable moral relativism. To the pragmatists of the White House and the State Department, he is simply uncontrollable — too strong, too clever, and too self-reliant.

Yet that very strength is precisely what has allowed him to keep Israel afloat amid a war of unprecedented dimensions, on multiple fronts and under suffocating international pressure. It is doubtful that any other Israeli leader, including those now posing as his successors, could have withstood such a storm.

From early 2024 onward, as the ground war in Gaza dragged on and civilian casualties rose, the calls for Netanyahu's resignation multiplied, accompanied by editorials predicting his imminent downfall. In Washington, the White House began quietly entertaining post-Netanyahu scenarios, assuming that his coalition would fracture or that Likud would replace him to “reset” relations with the United States.

But the Israeli reality proved more resilient than the speculations of Washington pundits. The war produced a “rally around the flag” effect: although divisions persisted, and although protests continued in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, a broad segment of the Israeli public rallied behind the government, convinced that any political fracture during wartime would be suicidal.

In March 2024, when Yoav Gallant — the defense minister — was dismissed, the opposition and its media allies interpreted the decision as the beginning of Netanyahu's end. Yet nothing of the sort occurred. Gallant's replacement by a more loyal and pragmatic figure strengthened the prime minister's control over the war effort, while international events — from Hezbollah's collapse in Lebanon to Iran's eventual defeat — only reinforced his stature.

Nevertheless, the fifth of Israel's five wars — the political and media

war — has been the most insidious of all. It has been waged in the newspapers, on television, in diplomatic corridors, and across social networks, with misinformation and manipulation as its primary weapons.

For the Western press, Netanyahu is the perfect villain: he refuses to yield, he speaks bluntly, and he dismantles their narratives with facts rather than slogans. For Israel's enemies, he personifies the unbreakable will of a people they wish to destroy. For many in his own country, weary of endless mobilizations and loss, he has become the scapegoat upon whom all frustrations can be projected.

And yet, if one looks beyond prejudice and propaganda, the record is indisputable: under Netanyahu's leadership, Israel has survived the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust; has dismantled Hamas's war machine; has annihilated Hezbollah; has neutralized the existential threat of Iran; and has maintained its internal stability while most of the world, and especially Europe, turned its back.

The paradox is that this same success has made him intolerable to his detractors. For the Western left, an Israel that defends itself effectively, led by a right-wing government, is an unforgivable affront. For the European bureaucracies, Netanyahu's victories expose their own impotence. For Washington's progressives, he is a living reminder that moral clarity and strategic determination still exist in a world they would prefer to dissolve into ambiguity.

In Israel, as in all democracies, the day will come when Netanyahu leaves office — by the ballot box, not by the streets. And perhaps, when that happens, many of those who now vilify him will long for the decisiveness, intelligence, and courage of the man they so eagerly condemned.

Meanwhile, history will record that, in the most difficult hour since 1948, when the State of Israel faced five wars at once — against its enemies, its supposed allies, its own military establishment, its domestic opposition, and global opinion — Benjamin Netanyahu stood firm, held the line, and ensured that Israel would live to fight another day.

## **V. Perceptions and Reality: The War for the Narrative**

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Modern wars are multidimensional. The battlefield is no longer merely a physical space in which to operate in 360 degrees; it has also expanded into other domains beyond the kinetic. Cyberspace is a clear example of strategic operations. But so too is the universe of ideas, images, and perceptions.

It has often been said that Israel is very good at winning battles on the battlefield but very poor in the sphere of the information war, where it feels uncomfortable and almost always reactive — on the defensive. It is true that the need to protect sources often prevents making public details that could change perceptions about what Israel is doing, but it must also be acknowledged that the decision-making processes regarding what to disseminate or publish are almost always exasperating.

And this is not merely a question of internal procedures. For years, Israel has encouraged visitors to come and see the country firsthand, in the hope that direct contact would open their eyes to the truth, make them aware of the threats facing the nation, and reveal the potential and promise of the region.

Without diminishing the importance of such efforts, it is undeniable that Israel has lagged far behind in the information war against a sophisticated enemy like Hamas. There are multiple reasons that explain this well.

First, there is a profound ignorance in Western societies about what war truly is. After decades of peace in Europe, for instance, none of today's leaders has any military experience; accustomed to seeing war from afar and through screens, they imagine it as something resembling a video game rather than the bloody and destructive reality it actually is. The strict censorship on casualties and destruction imposed by both sides in the war in Ukraine has not altered this deep-rooted idea that war must always be clean, surgical, brief, and casualty-free.

But war, as General Sherman aptly said while setting half of Georgia ablaze, "is hell." Even more so when it unfolds in an urban environment. Anyone who has studied the battle of Stalingrad, or the more recent cases of Grozny in Chechnya, Aleppo in Syria, or Mosul in Iraq, should know this well.

Aware of the West's deep aversion to casualties, Hamas has always sought to force Israel into causing a level of destruction intolerable to the well-meaning minds of Europe and America. And for that purpose, it has never hesitated to use its own civilians — not as human shields, but as victims to be exploited in the media. It is no small detail that Hamas's propaganda apparatus employed nearly two thousand people directly engaged in fabricating testimonies and images of pain and tragedy arising from military actions in Gaza.

At the end of August, a selective Israeli airstrike killed the head of Hamas's propaganda apparatus, Hudhaifa Kahlout — better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Obeida — the architect of the terrorist group's entire communications strategy. To put it plainly: Abu Obeida was not just another Hamas operative; he was, in fact, its Goebbels — the brain and soul of a full-fledged propaganda army within Hamas.

Unfortunately, for the Western press, Obeida was merely a Hamas spokesman — the man who supplied them with the information their newsrooms required. And I sincerely doubt they saw him that way out of mere ignorance.

Hamas's first great victory over Israel was to ensure that all information about Gaza — especially that concerning civilian casualties and deaths — was based on figures provided by the organization itself. The data used by global networks and media outlets came from an official Hamas source: the Ministry of Health — a source that also informed the data used by organizations such as the United Nations. But unlike in earlier conflicts, when journalists would explicitly warn about official information control (who doesn't remember Christiane Amanpour reporting for CNN from Baghdad in 1991, accompanied by an Iraqi censor whom she always mentioned to make clear that her reporting was being monitored and censored?), in the case of Gaza, it was deliberately concealed for months that the figures being circulated originated from the terrorist organization itself — with the obvious manipulation that entailed. Even today, this is not always acknowledged.

Compounding this reliance on Hamas-provided data, any information released by the Israeli army was automatically dismissed or questioned as supposedly partisan and self-interested — while the Hamas data was accepted uncritically. The most flagrant case was that of the al-Ahli hospital in Gaza, which was struck by a missile on the night of October 17, 2023,

causing numerous casualties and material damage. Hamas not only inflated the number of dead and wounded but also immediately blamed Israel for the alleged attack, triggering countless protests and demonstrations against Israeli “cruelty.” As was later confirmed, the truth was that this was not an Israeli strike at all, but a rocket launched from within Gaza itself that, due to a mechanical failure, fell on the hospital’s parking lot. But the political damage to Israel was already done. In modern information warfare, one rule always holds true: whoever takes the initiative, wins — even if through the crudest of lies.

As a consequence, Hamas’s second great media victory was to present Israel’s military actions as disproportionate and indiscriminate, claiming an alarming number of civilian deaths that could not withstand even minimal methodological scrutiny. There was zero analytical rigor on the part of the media and, consequently, their audiences, who were led to believe that Israel was murdering tens of thousands of innocent civilians — most of them women and children. To the absurd extent that a UN official even claimed more children had been killed in Gaza than had ever lived there.

It was not enough to know that the figures came from Hamas, that they deliberately blurred the line between civilians and combatants, that they offered no age ranges — only women, children, and men — or that they failed to distinguish between deaths caused by Israeli fire and those caused by Hamas’s own failed rocket launches (around 20% of all projectiles fell within Gaza itself). Nor did anyone make any comparative analysis with previous Gaza campaigns or other conflicts — something that would have revealed how Hamas’s leadership had cooked its numbers. Hamas wanted the world to swallow the falsehood that only 20% of the dead were men and that the rest — the overwhelming majority — were women and children.

Anyone with the slightest knowledge of military history would have quickly realized that Hamas’s figures — used to accuse Israel of genocide — were unfounded. It would have been the first war in which casualties increased linearly and contradicted all previous operations, and the data directly conflicted with other on-the-ground counts, such as those kept by UNRWA, which indicated a much higher percentage of male deaths (up to 62%) and, therefore, far fewer women and children killed.

The fact that both Hamas and the United Nations were ultimately forced to revise and cut by almost half the death tolls they had been reporting was barely noted publicly. No one wished to admit that the majority of the so-called “civilian” deaths were, in reality, active combatants. In fact, the

combatant-to-civilian casualty ratio in Gaza is the lowest of any war for which we have reliable data. Sadly, war — this one and all others — inevitably brings destruction and death.

The same is true of the characterization of Israel's strategy as a genocide against the Palestinian people — an accusation globally accepted but entirely divorced from reality. One could ridicule it by pointing out that nearly two million Arabs — or Palestinians, if one prefers — live peacefully within Israel's borders and overwhelmingly prefer to remain under Israeli sovereignty as citizens rather than in the so-called “occupied territories.” Or by noting that this supposed genocide is the first in which the targeted population has actually grown. But to be serious: not only is there no intention of exterminating an entire people, the Israeli offensive actions are conducted under strict rules designed to minimize harm. After a fact-finding mission by the High-Level Military Group in July 2024 — during which we interviewed political and military leaders, soldiers on the battlefield, and accompanied units inside Gaza — I was able to submit to the ICC an analysis detailing all the measures implemented by the IDF to reduce civilian casualties, which I witnessed personally. The conclusion was clear: the laws of war were being observed to the letter. Needless to say, the ICC chose mythos over logos.

When the controversy over casualty figures began to fade due to their blatant manipulation, Hamas turned to another falsehood to accuse Israel and constrain it diplomatically: the alleged famine in Gaza.

No matter how much Israel tried to demonstrate that humanitarian aid was flowing in quantities equal to or greater than before the war — and that the real problem was distribution and Hamas's profiteering — the notion of an imminent famine in Gaza was repeated for months, without ever materializing. To the point of absurdity: Greta Thunberg's humanitarian flotilla, ostensibly carrying food and medicine for Gazans, sailed without a single crate of either.

Facts are stubborn things, but they are not always accepted when they contradict a dominant narrative. It was claimed that Israel limited the entry of aid trucks to punish the population, and one number was endlessly repeated: before October 2023, 500 trucks entered Gaza daily. What went unmentioned was that only about 70 of those carried humanitarian supplies; the rest were construction materials, fuel, and various goods. The United Nations further confused its own data by mixing averages of working days and calendar days to justify apocalyptic scenarios that never came to pass.

It was conveniently ignored that the problem was not the quantity of aid entering Gaza, but its distribution and the systematic confiscation of goods by Hamas — much of it used to supply its fighters, the rest sold on the black market. Nor did anyone wish to discuss the number of calories per person entering the Strip, which would have demolished the famine narrative.

Everything provided by COGAT — the Israeli agency overseeing aid to Gaza, which, incidentally, never cut off water or electricity supplies despite knowing it helped Hamas survive — was dismissed by the media and some governments, who preferred to surrender not to evidence but to Hamas's manipulative propaganda game. The truth is that, however harsh the living conditions caused by war may be, famine has never taken hold in Gaza.

Moreover, Hamas's propaganda concealed that Israel was being held to a standard never demanded of any other army: to feed its enemies. Yet another example of the double standard applied to everything Israel says or does.

We will have to wait and see what happens once a ceasefire is reached — if Hamas truly releases the hostages, something it could have done from day one but refused, because its goal was never to win but to ensure that Israel would lose; not to build a Palestinian state, which it already had in Gaza, but to achieve the destruction of the State of Israel — its ultimate ambition.

The strategic problem with Hamas's propaganda machine has been the extent to which it has contaminated the entire Western world. The famous "Arab street" has now moved into American and European universities, while significant Islamist minorities in countries such as the United Kingdom and France — and in cities like New York and Berlin — have imposed their hatred not only against Israel but against all Jews, to whom they have promised extermination.

How radical Islamism has captured Muslim populations; how the new far left has allied with Islamism; and how Western governments have become cowardly and complacent institutions, turning a blind eye to incitement to hatred and the glorification of terrorism — these are issues that Israel must study carefully. For what is at stake is no longer merely Israel's legitimacy or its right to exist, but the safety of Jewish communities outside Israel.

The ceasefire should serve to expose all the lies spread against Israel by

Hamas propagandists both inside and outside Gaza. But I fear that will not happen, because Westerners will prefer to turn the page rather than admit their mistakes. On the contrary, they will say that now is the time to “monitor Israel” and enforce the terms of the agreement and Gaza’s reconstruction. Fortunately, it has been Trump — and not Von der Leyen — who has forced Hamas to surrender, release the hostages, and promise to step down from power in Gaza.

If Hamas is an idea — beyond an organization — Israel cannot afford to let the terrorists present themselves as the victors or speak as if they were. They have not been, and will not be for a long time. But if they are gifted that narrative, they will once again become a threat in the future.



Members of the Izz-Al Din Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Hamas terror group, march in Gaza City. Credit: Sipa US / Alamy Stock Photo

## **Conclusion**

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We have seen the five wars that Israel has been fighting simultaneously over the past two years. These wars could be summarized, following the biblical example of the Ten Commandments, in three: the war against its military enemies; the diplomatic war with its supposed allies; and the domestic one between opposition and government.

If the peace agreement over Gaza comes to fruition, Israel will have emerged clearly victorious over each and every one of its regional enemies, changing the strategic map of the entire Middle East for the better. I would venture to say that Israel has not only ended the existential threat that was beginning to tighten around it, but has also eliminated a threat to the entire world — from jihadism to a nuclear Iran. The only leader with the courage to acknowledge this has been the German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, who, after the Israeli bombardment of Iran's nuclear facilities, declared unequivocally that "Israel is doing the dirty work for the West."

It is to be hoped that peace and improved living conditions for Gazans, free from Hamas, will soften the critical tone of Israel's partners and allies, allowing tensions to subside. Yet Israel would be mistaken to forget who said or did what in these gravest moments for the country and the Jewish people. Declarations and actions such as those taken by Spain's socialist-communist government cannot go unanswered. This is not a matter of revenge, but of building an order that prevents such openly antisemitic behavior in the future.

The information war has turned values into merchandise. Every tragedy is measured by its media potential; every victim, by its political utility. In this context, the defense of Israel also becomes the defense of a principle: the very possibility of truth.

There is no war without mistakes, no army without failures, no democracy without contradictions. But to reduce Israel's history to a succession of prefabricated culpabilities is tantamount to denying its right to exist. And that, more than a manipulation of information, is a moral aggression.

Israel, however, still faces another enormous task: healing its internal wounds. It is clear that the civil-war-like level of confrontation promoted by the left only created international and strategic weakness for Israel

as a whole — not for the government. It would be desirable that, after the release of the Hamas hostages, tensions be reduced. But since the painful issue of the captives was merely another piece in the anti-Bibi strategy, I can only be skeptical. I imagine that once the Gaza agreement is reached, calls for a change of government will only intensify. Fortunately, Israel is a living and vibrant democracy, and only the ballot box will clarify the support each side enjoys, the mandate of the people over their leaders, and the direction Israel will take in the coming years.

Israel has a domestic, regional, and global agenda that will require great effort and dedication — and calm, visionary leaders capable of guiding the country once again toward the levels of freedom, prosperity, and security it deserves. One can only hope that it succeeds — in peace with itself and with its neighbors.











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