

ISRAEL AT WAR

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THE TAB

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

How Hamas Fooled the Experts

Why so many misread the Palestinian terror group's openly stated intentions and motives

BY ARMIN ROSEN

For the past 20 years, the best minds in Washington and Jerusalem treated Hamas as a pragmatic political operator whose leaders were satisfied living in the same world as the rest of us. Their charter, first adopted in 1988, endorsed a set of bloodcurdling millenarian goals. But despite the open madness and world-making ambitions of their public pronouncements, Hamas remained a semi-legitimate player, treated as just one unremarkable thread in the Middle East's rich tapestry of mildly threatening, gun-toting political dreamers. Even to the most hardened Israeli security officials they were a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot whose extreme rhetoric and regrettably unshakable habit of murdering Jewish civilians could be understood within the normative politics of "resistance movements." Their behavior could therefore be modulated and controlled

through a proper combination of sticks and carrots.

This view is untenable after this weekend, but I understand why it existed for so long. I once held versions of it myself. I visited the Gaza Strip on a two-day reporting trip in the winter of 2014, a couple of months after what was naively thought of as a major round of fighting between Israel and Hamas. I joined the ranks of journalists stupid enough to believe what we thought we'd seen there.

The Hamas statelet, though no poorer than places I'd been in Egypt and Jordan, and materially better off than Somalia or South Sudan, possessed its own special feeling of isolation that had the weight of an ambient despair. It was unnerving to turn on the radio and hear martial chanting about avenging Al-Aqsa, or to constantly look at billboards of Knesset member Yehuda Glick in a sniper crosshair. Members of the Strip's Hamas-controlled police force used the

ALSO IN TABLET THIS WEEK

How to Be an Ally

What can non-Jews do to stand by the Jewish community during this crisis?

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

'More Relevant Than Ever'

On the heels of the Hamas attack, a new exhibit about the Holocaust—aimed at children—opens in New York. As parents grapple this week with how to talk to their kids about antisemitism, persecution, and heroism, the timing seems opportune.

BY JAMIE BETESH CARTER

We Know Terror

Black Americans know the pains and the agony of being terrorized. Celebrating it is an outrage, and an insult—to us.

BY MICHAEL FISHER

Pray for Madness

Looking to God for answers in horrible times isn't a rational thing to do. That may be why it's so valuable.

BY ALTER YISRAEL SHIMON FEUERMAN

More Than a Hot Meal

Israeli restaurants and hotels offer free food and shelter for displaced civilians—as well as grieving families and soldiers preparing for battle

BY FLORA TSAPOVSKY



empty lot down the street from my hotel on the Gaza City waterfront as a drilling ground.

But that was hardly the whole story, I thought. After all, my hotel offered a comfortable room with stunning views of the Mediterranean. Hamas was eerily invisible in the Strip once you were past their checkpoint on the Gaza side of the Erez border crossing, whose Israeli half is an absurdist labyrinth of concrete corridors, sinister loudspeakers, and

remote-operated doors. Most Gazans I met had no particular love for the group and just wanted to be left alone. Gaza was hard to beat for sheer surrealism, what with the war damage and the excellent fish restaurants. I experienced the Hamas-era Strip as a weird and tragic expression of a bleak roster of immovable realities.

I now know I suffered from a failure of imagination, both moral and practical. Under Hamas, Gaza wasn't a place where extremists had resigned themselves to their own strange version of normality. Rather, it was an active launching pad for an insane utopia, for the vision of a purified world the group's fighters carried out during their atrocious rampage this past weekend.

The expert class labored under similar delusions. "It wasn't so much a misreading of what was in [Hamas'] hearts as it was the sense that they had accommodated to reality," said Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and deputy national security adviser under George W. Bush, including the period when Hamas won the only Palestinian parliamentary elections in history and took over the Gaza Strip. "They understood they couldn't destroy Israel, and that their real goal in these 15 years was to take over the West Bank as they had taken over Gaza—to create the maximum amount of violence and terror in the West Bank, and to protect their rule in Gaza. You have to look fairly widely to find someone who didn't basically accept that view." Abrams did not exempt himself from this group.

Michael Stephens, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a former research analyst for the British Foreign Office, sometimes met Hamas operatives when he was living in Doha a decade ago. Stephens' work at the time often brought him to the headquarters of Al Jazeera, Qatar's state-owned satellite network. Khaled Mashal and his entourage were a frequent though inconspicuous presence at the channel's offices, their arrival announced through the excited chatter of the many Syrian and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood supporters in the channel's employ. The Hamas men usually wore gray suits, Stephens recalled. "If they

came into the room, you wouldn't necessarily have known they were there."

Stephens had lived all over the Middle East, including in Israel, and believed he could situate Hamas within the region's usual run of armed extremists. "I've dealt with many people in the Middle East who I disagree with where I can see a logic," he said. "When I used to talk to the Shia militias in Iraq, it was: I don't agree with your view on how this conflict goes, but I can see how you think that. I felt the same way with Hamas. They were pretty uncompromising, they were pretty, in my view, unrealistic about their political demands. But they were political demands." In private, some of the Hamas guys would even say they could accept a Palestinian state along the lines of the 1967 borders. Stephens now realizes, with admirable analytic humility, that he had misassessed who and what Hamas really was. "At no stage did I think that these were the sort of people that would delight in women and children and babies being slaughtered for no real reason whatsoever other than that it could be done."

In 2006, Richard Haass, a former high-ranking State Department official who was, until recently, the long-serving president of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote that "U.S. officials ought to sit down with Hamas officials, much as they have with the leaders of Sinn Féin." That same year, the council published a breezy profile of Hamas politburo chief Khaled Mashal, which now serves as a thumbnail for the next 17 years of elite opinion. "Seen as charismatic and possessing diplomatic skills, Mashal is 'welcomed with open arms in various capitals and he's seen as a legitimate political actor,'" according to Jess Sadick, a former U.S. intelligence analyst. "Since Hamas' electoral victory in January 2006, Mashal has served as its representative in talks with the Egyptian and Russian governments, as well as the Arab League. He even met with a group of retired U.S. diplomats in February. Following that meeting, Edward Peck, a former ambassador to Iraq, told *The Times of London* that Mashal seemed to be 'moderate in many senses' and 'entirely rational.'"

The day after Hamas killed over 1,000 Israeli civilians, this “moderate and rational man” appeared on TV from his Qatari safe haven to call for the global harassment of “Zionists” and their American allies, and to “ask the mujahdeen to go in long caravans to spill their blood on the land of Palestine.”

Disturbingly, though unsurprisingly, numerous Israelis with impeccable security credentials, including the former Mossad director Efraim Halevy, voiced their support for talks with the Islamist group. Israel’s vaunted security leadership in general proved itself more than willing to provide cover for the decade-long effort to normalize Hamas, in part because they believed their country had no other viable strategic choice, in part because saying credulous things about a millenarian terror group is the pathway to approval (and nice fellowships!) in Washington and Cambridge, and in part because they are technocrats with an inevitably narrow understanding of people who turn out to be different from them.

In 2008, Ami Ayalon, the former head of the Shabak, assured a Council on Foreign Relations audience that Hamas was sensitive to the Palestinian popular will. “Hamas’ leadership asks itself before each terrorist operation how Palestinians will react. Only if the leadership believes that the public will support the operation does Hamas proceed,” Ayalon stated. He provided no particular evidence for his claim, of course, because none was needed; the belief in the “rationality” of Hamas was foundational to a worldview shared among the global class of security technocrats. Hamas’ reliance on public support was important, Ayalon continued, because “if Palestinians see President [Mahmoud] Abbas’ efforts as successful and the situation in the West Bank improves, Palestinians in Gaza will pressure Hamas to moderate.”

Ayalon is one of Israel’s great pro-peace liberals, and he had his own specific ideological reasons for wanting to believe, and for wanting others to believe, that Hamas would ultimately be measured, self-interested, and attuned to the inner desires of the people it rules. But his country’s right-wingers agreed with him too. “We made a huge mistake,

“At no stage did I think that these were the sort of people that would delight in women and children and babies being slaughtered for no real reason whatsoever other than that it could be done.”

including me, in believing a terror organization can change its DNA,” the former national security adviser Yaakov Amidror, a relative hardliner, told journalists earlier this week. “We heard from our friends around the world that they’re behaving more responsibly. And we believed it—in our stupidity.”

In the era of the Bush freedom agenda, experts who tended to be skeptical of the triumph of American-imposed democracy in the Middle East still wanted to believe—and wanted others to believe—that elections and popular accountability could moderate Hamas. Martin Indyk and Tamara Cofman Wittes—Middle East officials in future presidential administrations—argued in 2006 that Hamas’ shocking victory in that year’s Palestinian parliamentary elections should naturally be treated as an opportunity to legitimize the group on the U.S.’s terms. “[T]he Bush Administration should specify steps that Hamas could take were it inclined to observe the ‘rules of the game,’ and should make clear that if Hamas met these conditions, then the United States would treat it as a legitimate government,” the pair wrote. “The most important step would relate to violence and terrorism.” To put it very generously, over the

next 17 years whatever limited interest Hamas did have in reducing violence and terrorism, or even in being treated as a legitimate government by the U.S., turned out to be insignificant when held against more pressing concerns, such as killing Jews.

In the early 2010s, the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot and ideological fellow traveler, appeared to be the main beneficiary of the Arab Spring protests. Analysts routinely argued that in an apparently democratizing Arab world, Western tolerance of elected Islamists would prove the viability of a more open political space, which would itself serve as a hedge against both secular autocracy and jihadism. A couple of years later, right-thinking people commonly argued that Hamas was a valuable counterweight to ISIS. “ISIS is threatening Hamas in Gaza,” read the headline of a 2015 Vox article. “That’s scary news.”

As Stephens explained this week, in the mid-2010s the success of the Muslim Brotherhood meant Hamas was effectively an international group, with important bases of support in Turkey, Qatar, Libya, Tunisia, and Lebanon, along with a unique position in the fight against both ISIS and the Assad regime. The slaughter of Israelis could seem like a parochial goal in light of Hamas’ centrality to a number of regionwide historical shifts. “I probably had this view of Hamas as an organization that had much larger goals and aims other than just killing people,” Stephens acknowledged. “But apparently not.”

Hamas was thought to be on the edge of irrelevance by the end of the 2010s, thanks to a regionwide crackdown against the Brotherhood, the accumulated effect of wars with Israel, and Gaza’s general isolation and squalor—and of course the less threatening Hamas was militarily the less risks were inherent in engaging them. “Hamas is on the ropes economically, its political support is weak, and it has few means to press Israel,” the Brookings Institution’s Daniel Byman wrote in 2018. Byman endorsed the expert consensus that Israel had no option but to live with a semisovereign, Hamas-ruled statelet as its neighbor, however weak the group

had supposedly become. “Unfortunately for Israel, there is currently no credible alternative to Hamas in Gaza,” he wrote.

In both Israel and the U.S., a perfectly mainstream member of the U.S.-managed regional security alliance put the wealth and prestige of a nation-state behind the project of normalizing Hamas. Qatar’s patronage of the group, and the hosting of its senior leadership, meant that the Islamists became the medium through which Doha could establish functional relations with Israel without going through the trouble of opening formal diplomatic relations. Qatar gave \$1.1 billion in aid to Gaza between 2012 and 2018 alone, much of it brought in suitcases by Qatari diplomats entering the coastal strip through Israel.

Qatar was similarly generous in spreading cash around Washington, specifically to think tanks like Brookings and the International Crisis Group that repeatedly soft-pedaled Hamas. In 2014, for example, Martin Indyk—who co-authored the article with Tamara Cofman-Wittes that urged the Bush administration to attempt to normalize Hamas—accepted \$14.8 million in donations from Qatar in his capacity as vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings. He then went on to serve as the lead U.S. peace negotiator after the 2014 Gaza war.

One reason the massive payment from a leading Hamas sponsor to a program run by Indyk, a senior American diplomat whose decisions and gestalt directly impacted Hamas, didn’t attract much attention is that the financial relationship between Qatar and Brookings was itself old news by then. It began in 2007, when Brookings and Qatar made an agreement to open a branch of the think tank in Doha. By 2014, Qatar was Brookings’ single largest donor.

Throughout the 2000s, Doha also became home to numerous offshoots of at least six American colleges and universities.

Hamas became an accepted and quasi-normal feature of the regional landscape because of the drudgework of managing an active international border, which was the issue that allowed Qatar to serve as Hamas’ semiformal

diplomatic advocate. Teams of Qatari diplomats would often travel to Israel to coordinate aid deliveries into the Strip. As of 2018, an average of 425 trucks and 20 fuel tankers entered Gaza through the Keren Shalom border crossing each day. Some 17,000 Gazans held Israeli work permits before Saturday’s attack, compared to 7,000 as recently as mid-2021. The Strip received much of its electricity and its water from Israel. This summer, Israel moved toward allowing Gazans to use the international airport in Eilat. Israel made each of these decisions with the tacit understanding that they would benefit Hamas. A number of them could only have been implemented through coordination with Hamas.

The Gaza border represented one of the more perverse dilemmas a state can face. If Israel denied Gaza work permits, electricity, and Qatari cash, the place promised to become even poorer and more miserably isolated and more restive than it already was, glutting Hamas with willing recruits and forcing the Islamists even deeper into the embrace of its Iranian patron. Sealing the border would also create new and unnecessary diplomatic irritations for Jerusalem. But giving Gaza work permits, electricity, and Qatari cash meant subsidizing the killers who controlled the other side of the fence, the Hamas militants who send millions of Israeli citizens into bomb shelters every few years.

It is madness to subsidize a group that exists to terrorize you. It is something you only do if you believe you are heading off some still darker alternative. Israeli leaders believed Hamas was a bulwark against allegedly even worse groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and they thought Hamas was the only force that could save Israel from having to reoccupy the Strip and govern the place itself. In 2014, Israel halted a ground operation in Gaza at a point when it would still have been operationally possible, and perhaps not even particularly difficult, to have rounded up the group’s surviving leadership and put them all on trial, or in a row boat. Benjamin Netanyahu was spooked enough by the prospect of a post-conflict vacuum to send a negotiating team to Cairo, which assured its Hamas counterparts

that Israel’s restrictions on the coastal territory would be softened.

When Netanyahu returned to the premiership in late 2022, David Pollack of the Washington Institute predicted that the Gaza front would remain relatively quiet. “For its part, Hamas has demonstrated its clear intention to focus inward on its Gaza sanctuary rather than actively outward against Israel—at least for the time being, and at least on the southern front,” Pollack wrote.

To understand why so many experts and decision-makers misjudged Hamas so severely across such a long period of time, it might be useful to consult the handful of people who consistently got Hamas right. Mario Loyola, a former Pentagon official and White House speechwriter, argued in a 2021 essay for *National Review* that Hamas had already shown itself to be a strategic-level danger to Israel, sincerely dedicated to the country’s destruction.

“With more than 4,000 powerful missiles fired across a wide swath of Israel’s civilian population, in just eleven days, Hamas demonstrated that it poses an intolerable threat to Israel,” Loyola wrote shortly after the conclusion of that year’s Gaza flare-up. Loyola took Hamas at its word, trusting it had accumulated a stockpile of rockets and turned Gaza into a massive bunker not to shift Israeli behavior along the margins or to win an internal Palestinian political battle, but because of its stated goal of making Israel uninhabitable for the people currently living there. “The most potentially effective strategy that the Muslim extremists have to eradicate Israel is to terrorize the whole population into leaving,” Loyola told me this week. “Since missile terrorism poses an existential threat to the state, we’re in a logic of unconditional surrender.” Loyola had made this same argument more than two years ago.

Yigal Carmon, a retired IDF colonel and counterterrorism adviser to Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin, as well as the founder of the Middle East Media Research Institute, took a similarly clear-minded approach. On Aug. 29, he published a short yet freakishly prescient analytical piece titled “Signs

of Possible War in September-October.” MEMRI had published a prequel of sorts in May of 2018, amid the global uproar following the IDF’s killing of nearly 100 Palestinians during the so-called “great march of return” at the Gaza border. That piece noted that half of those killed had been members of Hamas, and that the Islamist group had been explicit about its aim of infiltrating Israel and carrying out attacks on neighboring kibbutzim.

“They said exactly what they are going to do—to breach the fence, then drive to the towns, and to kill,” Carmon said. The moral being that to predict this week’s attack, you simply had to ignore the policy world’s access and credential-fueled orgy of confidence in its own superior understanding of human motives, and instead study an abundant and in retrospect unambiguous public record of what Hamas has tried to do and says it wants to do. Then you had

to make the not unreasonable analytical leap of actually believing them.

“I didn’t buy into the stupidity that we are buying their quiet,” Carmon said of Israeli policy toward Hamas. “Because I knew that what they say is meaningful. It’s in open sources. Open sources are the whole world. The secret sources are minor to it.” ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Savage Nihilism of ‘Free Palestine’

It’s time for us to reckon with the hopelessness at the heart of Arab and Western ‘liberationist’ ideology

BY HUSSEIN ABOUBAKR MANSOUR

Free Palestine”—the slogan, the fantasy, and the policy—has always consciously implied the mass murder of Jews in their towns, streets, shops, and living rooms. Few are willing to say so openly, but in many intellectual, professional, and popular circles in the Middle East and the West, the idea of Palestinian national liberation has long been framed in terms that condone or necessitate the indiscriminate killing of Jews. For more unambiguous actors such as Hamas and the Islamic Republic of Iran, freeing Palestine simply means the total eradication of Israel without qualification. This is not a polemical point, but a basic reality and fact of our lives that demands scrutiny.

Consider the ideological milieu in which many Arabs and Muslims have been raised, including me. Growing up as a Muslim in Egypt, the concept of Palestine was never a geopolitical issue; it was a deeply ingrained part of

our collective moral identity, the unifying element of both our religious and secular Arab nationalism. It was, and remains, a cause that resonated with us politically, socially, and spiritually, often approaching a fervor that defies rationality. This emotional charge, embedded in the political and religious narratives of much of the Arab Muslim world, has made rubbish of the idea that the Palestinian cause is merely based on anti-Zionism rather than antisemitism.

This milieu, however, is not in any way essential to what it means to be Arab or Muslim—it is a thoroughly modern phenomenon shaped largely by the influence of European revolutionary ideologies on Arab intellectuals and political activists. Among these imported systems of thought is a strain of revolutionary antisemitism that casts Jews as the eternal enemy not just of Arabs but of all human beings. Not every Arab or Muslim subscribes to these views, of course, but when fused with preexisting religious and cultural

biases, they have infected almost every institution, pattern of thought, and aspect of life in the Arab Muslim world. Modern Arab political and religious literature is filled with the claim that Jews are *hostis humani generis*, the enemies of mankind—a classical European libel, and a French revolutionary cry.

The problems of this poisonous strain of thought are compounded by the concept that “freeing Palestine” is a species of resistance against foreign settler colonialists, a Fanonian revolution in which violence against civilians is defended as a legitimate means of achieving racial justice. The wholesale labeling of Israeli Jews—the vast majority of whom are refugees or descendants of refugees from Arab Muslim dictatorships and Soviet totalitarianism—as colonizers, settlers, and imperialists is in fact a type of collective ethnic punishment, nonsensical even on its own twisted terms, which recalls the medieval Christian denunciation of Jews as moral abominations, as a group and as individuals. You might have noticed in the last few days that those committed to liberating Palestine can’t seem to avoid the abject dehumanization of the Jews as a people—and that their aim is not for Palestinians to simply live in peace, dignity, and freedom alongside Israelis, but a state that is necessarily established upon the ruins of Israel. Hamas is explicit in its intention to murder the Jewish population of Israel and enslave any survivors; its partisans in the Middle East and the West are coyer on this point.

Islamists articulate the fantasy of

Jewish eradication in the language of jihad, framed in eschatological terms, and imbued with a sense of divine justice and cosmic warfare—what Westerners would ordinarily recognize as a type of religious fascism. But while the Islamist version of this idea is potent for the purposes of mobilizing the impoverished and uneducated masses, the “left-wing” or secular version—couched in the language of Fanon and Karl Marx, of human emancipation, equality, anti-capitalism, and social justice—is the more effective means of mobilizing opinion among the Western intelligentsia. The point is that they are two sides of the same coin, the value of which is set in Jewish blood.

For those who are shaped by such a worldview—whether the “right-wing” or the “left-wing” version, the religious or the atheistic—celebrating the murder of innocent Israeli civilians, including children, women, and the elderly, is an expression of the partial fulfillment of a moral vision. As a teenager in Egypt, I recall nearly all the adults around me expressing such feelings when following the news of suicide bombings targeting Israeli civilians during the Second Intifada. Egypt’s most prominent religious authorities declared the perpetrators to be martyrs and saints. In a way, it was not unlike the valorization and even canonization of those who destroyed livelihoods, burned property, and targeted police officers during the protests in America in the summer of 2020. I do not mean to inject American domestic politics where they do not belong, or to suggest a perfect moral equivalence, but there is a reason that leaders of Hamas and the Islamic Republic of Iran themselves insist that they are engaged in the same struggle against racism.

Almost every Arab Muslim knows that what I’m describing is not a personal opinion but objective reality. We may try to belittle these facts, or dismiss them as the delusional daydreams of uneducated know-nothings under the influence of religious and populist fanatics. But we should not deny that they are true.

My fear is that the impulse to dismiss

“My fear is that the impulse to dismiss and belittle is the byproduct not of sincere belief but of a deep sense of helplessness.”

and belittle is the byproduct not of sincere belief but of a deep sense of helplessness. After many recent conversations with the rising generation of young, intelligent, Westernized, and highly educated Arab professionals and diplomats, I have witnessed a strong urge not to confront this reality. Even among those who genuinely accept the legitimacy of Israel in a way their parents would have never been capable of, I almost always hear them describe the deaths of innocent Israelis as somehow being their own fault, or at least the fault of the Israeli government for not unilaterally making peace and ending the conflict. There is nothing more depressing than the surrender of the young to a problem they see as too big to solve.

Those of us who belong to the cosmopolitan professional class of Arabs, who jump from country to country and from one lifestyle to another, benefiting from foreign cultures that live on the moral currency of liberalism and tolerance, are in many cases secretly ashamed. We see the antisemitism, the bloodlust, the insanity, and we cringe—but we hope it goes away. It’s easier for us to look forward to a hypothetical future where things are otherwise. It’s easier to ingratiate ourselves to the new social world where we want to belong,

rather than grapple with the failures of the one we’ve left behind. We dismiss, we belittle, we explain away, we say, “What about Shireen Abu Akleh?”—and we go on pretending.

But even we are not as fresh or youthful as we like to think. We are walking in the footsteps of previous generations of modernizing, secular, intellectual Arabs. They too wanted nothing to do with their native lands, which they saw as having none of the power, prestige, or respect they craved. In their egotism and intellectual narcissism, they didn’t want to belong to “backward” societies. So they sought in foreign, mostly Western ideologies a refuge and a hiding place from backwardness. They joined the progressive secular movements and trendy revolutions because they offered an escape hatch from the drudgery of slow, marginal, local change. They became revolutionaries because they were afraid and insecure. Like Edward Said, they were anti-Zionist and anti-American “humanists” because they did not want to be, or could not be, “Arabs.” Their obvious cultural chauvinism was simply an urge to self-annihilate, to disappear into universalism. Their lives were a hopeless quest to shed their own skin.

To the Arabs of my own generation, I say we need a truly different approach. I’m not asking you to love Israel or Zionism, or to hang a poster of hipster Herzl in your bedroom. If you are critical of Israel and think there should be a Palestine, continue to do so. All I ask is for you to be authentically courageous, to admit that the murder we all witnessed in the last few days is an accurate representation and logical consequence of a catastrophic moral system, the one we all know intimately. This is a moment for collective introspection. It’s time to confront the darker corners of our ideological heritage, and question the ideas and beliefs we may have uncritically absorbed. Only by doing so can we hope to contribute to a more constructive and humane world for ourselves. ■

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The Hell of Urban Warfare Is Not Unique to Gaza

During the campaign against ISIS in Mosul, the U.S. flattened a large city with far less provocation—while observing all the rules of modern war

BY BRADLEY BRINCKA

In the coming days, Israel may launch a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip in response to the shocking pogrom carried out against Israelis on Oct. 7. The looming operation has led many to search for precedents in military history. There is one recent urban conflagration with great relevance to the impending assault on Gaza that, though unlikely to provide comfort to anyone, may offer some historical grounding. That is the U.S.-backed Iraqi campaign to liberate Mosul from the Islamic State in 2016-17.

I was a minor participant in this titanic affair, serving as a volunteer ambulance driver with the Free Burma Rangers, a humanitarian medical group then embedded with the Iraqi Army. From January to June 2017, I accompanied Iraq's 9th Armored Division as it slowly encircled Mosul from the west before finally throwing all of its American- and Soviet-made tanks into the dense concrete jungle along the Tigris river at the battle's climax that spring. It was a formative experience as a younger man, and one that taught me the brutal nature of urban combat first hand.

Three years earlier, the Islamic State had exploded onto the world stage after routing the same Iraqi Army in Mosul, conquering the country's second-largest city with ease over the course of five days, as the American-trained Iraqi Army largely collapsed or fled. On June 29, 2014, the group's secretive leader,

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, proclaimed his caliphate. A short time later, his legions invaded the neighboring district of Sinjar, subjecting its Yazidi inhabitants to a genocide, exterminating whole villages, impressing over 6,000 women and children into sexual concubinage, and boasting of the reimposition of chattel slavery in their glossy English-language magazine. In the months that followed, a notorious troop of British national ISIS members who came to be known as "The Beatles" beheaded Western hostages and threatened future attacks. These viral videos, combined with images of Yazidi women carried off to the caliphate's slave markets, had the effect of decisively galvanizing American public opinion in favor of military intervention.

Rather than sending its own troops back into Iraq, the war-weary U.S. would seek to win "by, with, and through" its local proxies while "leading from behind." In practice this meant funding, equipping, and providing U.S. air support to Iranian-backed Shia militia groups—the same groups that had previously carried out attacks on U.S. soldiers—which formed the backbone of Iraq's new Popular Mobilization Forces. At the same time, small groups of U.S. special operations soldiers began training elite Iraqi commando units in anticipation of an eventual push to drive ISIS out of Mosul. The approach meant that Iraqi and Kurdish forces would do all the fighting and dying while the U.S. provided logistical,

intelligence, and—most crucially—air support. It was a strategy that would prove to be devastatingly effective.

For the next five years, the American-led coalition pursued a nearly continuous bombing campaign in conjunction with partner ground operations. Spanning two administrations, the campaign resulted in the leveling of multiple major cities across Iraq and Syria, killing tens of thousands, and displacing hundreds of thousands more. At no point during that time was the efficacy or morality of this policy meaningfully discussed within the body politic. If anything, candidates for public office vied to outdo one another regarding who would be tougher against the terror group, with presidential candidate Donald Trump suggesting, "You have to take out their families when you get these terrorists. They care about their lives, don't kid yourself."

Meanwhile, the Islamic State, while pushed back in other parts of Iraq, had time to fortify defenses in the urban strongholds under its control. The caliphate's eschatological ambitions collided with the coalition's determination to uproot it as the two raced toward an inescapable trajectory: the annihilation of cities like Manbij, Mosul, and Raqqa.

Before its sacking in 2014, the great riverine metropolis of Mosul boasted an estimated 2 million residents. By 2016, as many as 12,000 hardened ISIS defenders confronted a patchwork of 100,000 Iraqi soldiers, police, and the elite Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS). The Iraqis were better armed, better trained, and better led than before, and they were now backed by stupefying American air power. The battle commenced on Oct. 16, 2016. What had taken the Islamic State less than a week to achieve in 2014 would take 252 days of savage fighting to undo.

Owing to the character of urban combat, the Iraqi soldiers tasked with ridding Mosul of ISIS faced all manner of harrowing tactical and moral dilemmas. They confronted an entrenched opponent with two years to prepare for a siege shielded by noncombatants (Hamas by comparison has ruled Gaza since 2007). Drones—rudimentary

novelties on the battlefield then, years before their proliferation in Eastern Europe—appeared from nowhere in liberated areas, instilling panic among soldiers and civilians alike because of the lethal ordnance they frequently dropped. Heavily armored “suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices” (SVBIEDs) drove out of garages and detonated behind passing Iraqi columns. An invisible dimension of subterranean tunnels—Gaza has its own cement reinforced tunnel system built by Hamas—enabled Islamic State fighters to spring from the earth and cause mayhem. Mechanized Iraqi soldiers, in keeping with the cavalryman’s maxim of “Death Before Dismount,” demurred from chasing ghosts into these labyrinths, preferring instead to collapse the tunnels and entomb their foes.

The heroism of the Iraqi soldiers who fought in Mosul cannot obscure the startling cost of liberation: some 8,200 dead Iraqi servicemen (a whopping 60% casualty rate among the elite CTS), an estimated 10,000 civilians killed (though likely much higher) of which 3,200 are thought to have perished in coalition airstrikes, and the destruction of 40,000 homes in west Mosul alone. Notwithstanding the occasional media criticisms of especially deadly strikes, there were no popular protests in Western or Arab capitals to speak of and certainly nothing akin to the tens of thousands marching in the streets the past week over Gaza. Back then, the climactic showdown between Iraq and the Islamic State was just another quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom most were content to know nothing.

The apocalyptic destruction visited on Mosul might lead some to conclude the coalition pursued an indiscriminate bombing campaign to rid the city of its occupiers, but that was not the case at all. U.S. targeting procedures are heavily regimented and bureaucratized with lawyers involved at every step. The banal process of determining whether a building and its occupants are to be vaporized more closely resembles a quarterly HOA board meeting than the ravings of Dr. Strangelove.

It is a point worth emphasizing:

“Even the most ‘humane’ application of force in full accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict in a densely populated city results in shocking death and destruction.”

Even the most “humane” application of force in full accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict in a densely populated city results in shocking death and destruction far in excess of what most would consider “proportionate.” To innocents on the business end of such strikes, this jargon would appear as mere ritualistic ablutions or voodoo; the obfuscation of an enterprise which—when stripped to its essence—is the imprecise incineration of one’s foes by means of mechanical dragons. Abstractions like “surgical precision” and “harm reduction” are cold comfort to one whose home has been flattened or family line eliminated.

That said, neither Iraq nor the coalition ever seriously countenanced the idea of leaving Mosul in the hands of the Islamic State. The threat was perceived as existential and the preceding years’ outrages and sadism had to be avenged. Mosul’s fate was decided long before Iraqi troops approached its outskirts in 2016. The brutal logic of destroying the city to save it had long since been internalized. The prospect of human sacrifice appeared less horrifying only when compared with the implications of forgoing the sacrifice. To not administer the purging fire would be for the slave markets to continue humming, for the captives to languish,

for millions of souls to remain under the boot of a death-worshipping cult, and for the caliphate’s hordes to flood out of the desert once more. To the extent there was any choice, it was not between the high and the low but between the terrible and the unthinkable. Such is the dilemma of confronting a foe ensconced in a city among a population.

This brings the discussion at last to Gaza. The horrors inflicted on southern Israel by Hamas last week represent a casus belli of a magnitude that dwarfs the comparably trivial one that spurred Americans to shrug at killing a new state in its infancy and leveling whole metropolises on the other side of the world. The knifing of Jewish mothers and the unborn, the slaughter, the pyres of children, and outrages against women carried off as war booty to the attackers’ lairs, are hauntingly evocative of the genocidal campaign against the Yazidis in 2014.

I write with no glee or triumphalism that the momentum of events points toward an ominous and seemingly inexorable trajectory: that Gaza is doomed, that the city will be destroyed, and that its population will soon share the people of Mosul’s fate. Human nature being what it is, any Israeli government unwilling or too squeamish to carry this out would almost certainly be replaced by one with no such compunctions, or find itself vanquished by other means. No technological sorcery will enable Israel to extirpate Hamas in a way that would leave civilians unscathed or satisfy those for whom the horrors of urban warfare and siege are problems amenable through ever more effective technocratic management.

Alas, Mosul still stands today, but it is no longer the city it once was nor shall it ever be again. Its shattered visage lies half-sunk in the sands of northern Iraq. It is Ozymandias-like, a colossal wreck, boundless and bare. It is a testament to the wages of madness, hubris, and human sacrifice, and a harbinger of what is to come. ■

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Eyeless in Gaza

How the U.S. blinded Israeli intelligence gathering efforts on Hamas and other Palestinian groups inside Lebanon

BY TONY BADRAN

Protesters clash with Lebanese security forces outside the U.S. Embassy near Beirut on Oct. 18, 2023, following a strike on a Gaza hospital on Oct. 17 that Hamas officials said killed at least 200 people. The Israeli army said the strike was from a rocket misfired by Palestinian militants. Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement called for a 'day of rage' to condemn the strike.

“... Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian
yoke deliver;
Ask for this great deliverer now, and
find him
Eyeless in Gaza ...”
—John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

It will be a while before we're able to piece together a more complete picture of how Israel, despite its vaunted intelligence-gathering capabilities, was blindsided by the massive Hamas terrorist onslaught on Oct. 7, which led to the biggest slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust. After the current Israeli operation in Gaza concludes, there will be inquiries, official and unofficial, in Israel and beyond, about what contributed to this intelligence failure. Where was Israel blinded, and how?

A key focal point for these inquiries will be Lebanon. Immediately following the Oct. 7 massacre, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, citing Hamas and Hezbollah sources, that the terrorist attack was planned by the Iranians and Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the Iranians had set up a joint operations room, the existence of which Hezbollah media had previously disclosed in 2021.

The New York Times corroborated the *Journal's* story a few days later, adding that training for the attack, including on paragliders which were used to slaughter Israelis and tourists at a music festival, also took place in Lebanon.

So how did Israel find itself blind and deaf in Lebanon? Why was it that, with all this activity taking place in Lebanon over several months, Israel was not able to pick up meaningful intelligence on a lethal adversary? To answer these questions, we must turn to the current security environment in Lebanon, which in turn shaped and constrained Israel's intelligence gathering capabilities.

Since Israel's last major war in Lebanon in 2006, the tiny county has come under American sponsorship, even as it remained under Iranian suzerainty via its local regent, Hezbollah. This U.S.-Iranian condominium, solidified during Barack Obama's two terms in office, is being topped off by the construction of a brand-new, \$1 billion U.S. Embassy in Beirut—a symbol of the U.S.'s commitment to underwriting the country's existing Hezbollah-led order.

America's most significant commitments to Iranian-dominated Lebanon involve underwriting the Lebanese security sector, especially its two largest organs: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF). The U.S. provides arms, training and equipment to these forces. Over the past year, American taxpayer dollars have also underwritten their salaries.

Right from the outset, the Lebanese security forces used American training and equipment to uncover Israeli spy cells gathering intelligence on Hezbollah. In 2009, the ISF detected an Israeli breach of Hezbollah's ranks. The then-head of the ISF called the group's

intelligence chief and told him: “You've been infiltrated.” After Hezbollah and the ISF exchanged information, Hezbollah reportedly then took over the surveillance, apprehension, and interrogation of the spies. Following the assassination of Hezbollah senior commander Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus the previous year, the LAF gave Hezbollah a counterintelligence assist by snatching Israeli spies in eastern Lebanon.

It's hard to argue with the notion that funding the security arm of an Iranian-backed pseudo-state run by a terror army that has murdered hundreds of Americans and targets America's only useful military ally in the region is the furthest thing from a wise or sane investment. But the U.S. didn't set out to fund Hezbollah's auxiliary security services—not initially.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, Washington imagined that building and strengthening so-called state institutions in Lebanon would bolster a weak political coalition the U.S. was then backing, and help fend off a violent campaign sponsored by Syria and meant to eliminate the possibility of any kind of functioning Lebanese state. The ISF's Intelligence Branch in particular was run by figures close to Saad Hariri, the son of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, whom Hezbollah had assassinated four years earlier. A U.N. commission, and then a special tribunal, were set up to investigate Hariri Sr.'s murder, and this loyalist ISF unit worked with the U.N. investigators. A small number of ISF officers spent their days analyzing the data of cell-phone communications between members of the Hezbollah assassination unit that killed Hariri Sr. They were

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all targeted for assassination between 2006 and 2008.

Whatever the intentions of the Bush-era policy, to anyone familiar with Lebanese dynamics, it was as predictable as it was inevitable that the ISF would reach out to Hezbollah with an offer to provide it with counterintelligence services. With that offer, the ISF essentially was telling Hezbollah, “the assistance we are getting from the U.S. is not targeted against you. To the contrary, it can be of benefit to you. It is our duty, as a security organ of the state, to defend Lebanon and every Lebanese against all external threats, the Israeli enemy chief among them. So American assistance can be a boon to you as well.”

Guided by a combination of fear as well as a desire to curry favor, Lebanese security organs redirected the signal-detection equipment provided by the U.S. to fight Islamic militants, and used it against Israel instead. Under the terms of the arrangement with Hezbollah, the LAF and ISF are allowed, even encouraged, to use American support to Hezbollah’s advantage by focusing on Sunni Islamic groups (that is, those not already working or aligned with Hezbollah) and on Israel.

This cooperation did not eliminate Hezbollah’s red lines, however. It merely affirmed the terror group’s dominance. As such, when the head of the ISF Intelligence Branch was deemed a potential source of trouble in the early days of the uprising against the Assad regime, he was swiftly eliminated in an October 2012 car bombing.

The counterintelligence

“Funding the security arm of an Iranian-backed pseudo-state run by a terror army that targets America’s only useful military ally in the region is the furthest thing from a wise or sane investment.”

collaboration between Hezbollah and the security services has continued uninterrupted ever since. In recent years, LAF and ISF counterintelligence units have proved their worth to Hezbollah by uncovering Israeli agents, networks, and spying equipment.

The largest recent ISF counterintelligence operation occurred in the beginning of 2022, a few months after Hezbollah media disclosed the existence of the IRGC joint operations room in Beirut that oversaw the 2021 war in Gaza. The ISF uncovered multiple Israeli spy cells inside Lebanon, some of which had penetrated Hezbollah and others that were providing intelligence from Syria. Others, meanwhile, were collecting on Hamas. According to a report in the pro-Hezbollah *Al-Akhbar*, the informants were asked to observe movements of Palestinian outsiders into the camps and to monitor locations that might have a military purpose.

Up until that point, Israel had been watching Hamas’ rising profile in the country quite closely. An unsourced December 2021 report in *Yedioth Ahronoth* claimed Hamas fighters in Lebanon were receiving training from the Iranians. The dismantling of the spy networks came before the public activity of Hamas and Palestinian

Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leaders in Lebanon was set to increase. Senior leaders in both factions, including PIJ’s Ziad Nakhleh, had either already relocated to Lebanon or were about to. With this process underway, it was necessary to blind the Israelis, using U.S.-trained-and-equipped Lebanese counterintelligence forces—who enjoyed the additional advantage of being immune to Israeli retaliation, as U.S.-trained-and-protected state actors.

In August 2022, a meeting between Nakhleh, the Islamic Jihad leader, and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah was publicized by Hezbollah media. The meeting discussed the so-called “unity of fronts” against Israel, and “the roles all the parties in the Resistance Axis are expected to play in the next stage.” According to Iranian sources cited in the above-mentioned *New York Times* report, planning for the Hamas terrorist attack started around this time in 2022.

The Iranian-Hezbollah-Palestinian coordination effort went into high gear in 2023, specifically in Lebanon. In early April 2023, the head of Iran’s Quds Force, Esmail Ghaani, arrived in Beirut to meet with the leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas, and PIJ at the Iranian Embassy. Prior to his Beirut stop, Ghaani’s itinerary reportedly included meetings with leaders of IRGC-commanded militias operating in Syria and Iran. In conjunction with Ghaani’s Beirut visit, Hezbollah orchestrated the firing of 34 rockets—the largest number to be fired from Lebanon since 2006. From April through September, Hamas and PIJ leaders held meetings with the Iranian leadership in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, and continued to consult regularly with Nasrallah in Beirut.

Ghaani reportedly returned to Beirut in early August. Right before the Quds Force commander’s second visit, clashes erupted in Ain el-Helweh, the largest Palestinian camp near Sidon, between Fatah and Islamist factions. The fighting began following a visit to Lebanon by Palestinian Authority intelligence chief Majed Faraj, and the subsequent assassination of one of

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his security officials in the camp, Abu Ashraf al-Armoushi.

Pro-Hezbollah media interpreted Faraj's visit as intersecting with Israeli interests in an attempt to agitate against Hamas and PIJ, who had been leading the unrest in the West Bank. According to *Al-Akhbar*, Faraj wanted "to curb the Palestinian resistance factions which have grown capable of targeting Israeli settlements with rockets." In addition, the paper claimed, Faraj offered cooperation with the Lebanese government on checking any uncontrolled armed presence in the camps, as well as handing in all wanted men to the authorities, "in return for Beirut to tighten the vise on Hamas' and Islamic Jihad's political and military activity" in Lebanon.

If that was indeed Faraj's plan, it didn't go anywhere. The initial fighting stopped a few days later in early August before breaking out again briefly the following month and ending in a ceasefire in mid-September 2023.

As these events unfolded in the period immediately preceding the Oct. 7 attack, the ISF uncovered and arrested another Hamas operative spying for Israel in Sidon. The ISF reportedly also confiscated his computers and was able to trace his various connections inside Hamas' Qassam Brigades. According to *Al-Akhbar*, his tasks included monitoring Hamas members who had moved to Lebanon from the West Bank and Gaza.

The ISF's bust led to their greater cooperation with Hamas to obtain further information. In turn, *Al-Akhbar* claimed, Hamas began its own investigation in Gaza to track everyone the operative had worked with or remained in contact with since coming to Lebanon from Turkey. That is, the ISF once again contributed to blinding Israel on behalf of Iranian assets. In doing so, it may well have directly aided and reinforced Hamas operational security in Gaza on the eve of the Oct. 7 attack.

U.S. policy in Lebanon, and its sponsorship of the Lebanese security sector, badly undermined Israel's collection capabilities in the country. But what about America's own intelligence gathering capabilities in Lebanon? Over the past decade, one of

“Hundreds of military-aged Palestinian hang gliders repeatedly soaring over any country seems like a difficult target for a major intelligence service to miss.”

the justifications you'd hear from U.S. officials and bureaucrats for supporting the Lebanese military and security organs was that this deepening relationship gave America better visibility and human intelligence into what was going inside a terror hotbed. America's Lebanese assets would also supplement our extensive capabilities monitoring terror groups throughout the region, including the IRGC, Hezbollah, and Hamas. And that's in addition to what we collect in neighboring Syria, where the Iranian network has been active for years. By way of example, in 2017, following a chemical attack in northwestern Syria by the Assad regime, the U.S. government disclosed that signals intelligence had intercepted communications of the Syrian command leaving no doubt as to Assad's responsibility for the attack.

And yet, despite countless meetings and high-level visits between Iranian officials, Hezbollah, and Hamas, coupled with intensified kinetic activity in the region, U.S. officials are saying that they "weren't tracking" this operation. That answer is, to put it mildly, difficult to believe. But let's ask another question: how come none of the U.S.-subsidized clients in the Lebanese military and security services—the ones who were busy busting Israeli cells all

the way up to September—provided the U.S. any meaningful intelligence, even despite the fact that Hamas paragliders had been training in Lebanon? Hundreds of military-aged Palestinian hang gliders repeatedly soaring over any country seems like a difficult target for a major intelligence service to miss.

What seems clear is that, in exchange for the U.S. providing training and equipment, and paying everyone's salaries, U.S. clients inside Lebanon managed exclusively to provide U.S.-subsidized counterintelligence support to Hezbollah and Hamas that contributed to blinding Israel, while failing entirely to provide the U.S. itself with any relevant information whatsoever. The U.S. government's awesome signals intelligence capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant, Iraq, and the Gulf were also unable to pick up anything of interest, while the planning and the training was happening in the country where the Biden administration is completing a 43-acre embassy compound.

It would be bad enough that U.S. policy in Lebanon appears to have contributed to keeping Israel in the dark in the months before the Oct. 7 massacre. It did. But it also did more than that. As Hezbollah increased the tempo of cross border attacks and provocations from Lebanon, leading to the establishment of a military outpost in the Israeli Golan, the administration backed Hezbollah's play and moved to distract Israel by tying it down in a land border demarcation process with the Lebanese, helping to keep Israel's political echelon from noticing the actual threat brewing inside Lebanon.

Did the U.S. intend for any of this to happen? Not exactly. On the other hand, everything that did happen was the direct product of U.S. policy, which means that America must shoulder some part of the blame. And if the U.S. chooses to continue its deadly policies in Lebanon, it will hardly be able to plead ignorance the next time that the Iranian "axis of resistance" murderers Israelis—and Americans. ■

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‘The Konceptsia’

Intelligence failures are never about the details. In Israel's case, the operational and conceptual failures that led to Saturday's massacre are even more disturbing.

BY NORMAN SAMUELS

A central purpose of intelligence is the avoidance of surprise. Label an event like Saturday's massacre a “surprise attack,” and the next step will naturally be the search for the source of the “intelligence failure.” Israeli government spokesmen will reply that it is too early and too distracting to focus on that question while we are at war. From the standpoint of intelligence analysis, the answer is, yes and no.

A full accounting of how Hamas crossed the Gaza border and massacred over 1,200 men, women, and children with very little apparent opposition will certainly require data and answers that may not be available to analysts for years. But another “surprise attack” may well be in the making right now, and bureaucrats may already be busy covering their tracks. Inconvenient and limited as the answers will be, therefore, we should not hesitate to ask tough questions now about the failure of the intelligence and military organizations to perform the functions for which they exist: to anticipate grave threats and protect the people.

One way to begin answering those questions is to look at a number of other major “surprise attacks” in modern history which have also been blamed in good measure on “intelligence failures”: the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 9/11 in America, and the Egyptian-Syrian attack in the Yom Kippur War—which is the most relevant case study for us.

Perhaps the most obvious and important point to be made about all three events is that there was already a

tense, hostile background in place; the “surprise” lay in the specific timing, location, and strategy of the attacks. Both the U.S. and Israeli political and military leadership certainly knew the broad dangers they faced; the job of intelligence in all three cases was to identify the when, where, who, and how. While the failure of the intelligence leadership was calamitous, it was hardly exclusive to them.

In the current situation, Israel's military operational failures were every bit as shocking, and perhaps even more consequential than its “intelligence failure.” Israeli fighter jets based two minutes flying time from the ruptured Gaza fence took six hours to appear overhead. Israeli soldiers were shot and abducted in their beds on army bases. A large, well-advertised public gathering of thousands of young Israelis, held right on the Gaza border—an event which may have in fact been the trigger for the attack—had no apparent security.

Which brings us to our first point: Intelligence and military organizations function within the overall perspectives of the larger society to which their members belong; they help shape those perspectives, but they are also its captives. They look at the world through the same glasses—rose-tinted or otherwise—that the rest of us do. The view through those glasses is also inevitably expressed in strategic concepts—what Israelis in 1973 referred to as the “Konceptsia.”

In 1973, the “Konceptsia” included a general agreement among Israel's intelligence, military, and political leaders on at least the following “facts”:

No. 1: Israel was surrounded by

enemies, but was strong enough to survive with adequate warning.

No. 2: Egypt was the prime enemy, but still smarted from its 1967 defeat and would not attack unless it had the means to neutralize the Israeli air force.

No. 3: Syria was too weak to attack alone and would therefore only attack together with Egypt; a spectacular dogfight over Syria in September between the Syrian and Israeli air forces resulted in the downing of 13 Syrian fighter planes and no Israeli losses, suggesting the futility of such an attack.

No. 4: In 1967, Israel had—almost miraculously—fought off the combined armies of the Arab world; the Egyptian soldier was found to be technologically ill-equipped. In battle, the Egyptian units turned and ran.

No. 5: Israel maintained constant physical surveillance on all fronts and, it was believed, had high-level spies and other intelligence sources at top levels in the Arab countries, whose information, however selectively received and prioritized, seemed to reinforce the Konceptsia. Secret intelligence and espionage by their nature involve lies and deception. Can you trust your sources, especially foreign ones—whether they are spies within enemy organizations, or representatives of ostensibly friendly nations or allies?

Taken together, these different “facts” generated a sense of confidence, perhaps a sense of superiority (ethnic? cultural? chutzpah? gross underestimation of the enemy?), which formed the Konceptsia—the outlook and the operating assumptions which were widely accepted by Israel's intelligence and military leadership, and formed the background to the intelligence failure which came very close to destroying the Jewish state.

The rest of the autopsy of Israel's “intelligence failure” in 1973 is detail, even *pilpul*. The mistakes in evaluating information from spies, in correctly evaluating information from the United States, the military readiness in the north, the role of Russian geopolitical strategy and Russian advisers in Egypt and Syria, while all real enough, are understandable only within the ideological womb of the Konceptsia.

It is more concrete to examine

technical failures, both then and now, and these failures are certainly very real and serious. There is satisfaction in pointing to specific mistakes, and in holding individuals responsible for errors that cost lives. But the background assumptions and outlook of a country's military and political leaders are the keys to understanding its "intelligence failures."

So what was the *Konceptsia* in Israel on Shemini Atzeret, 5784? The following suggestions, hasty and subjective, should ring a bell:

No. 1: We have the most powerful military and the most capable intelligence in the Middle East; we have the most advanced technology; we are a financial and corporate powerhouse; we are rich and we live well.

No. 2: No Arab nation can pose a military threat to Israel; Iran is a grave indirect threat through Hezbollah, but we can deal with them diplomatically and militarily. Nuclear threat? Not yet.

No. 3: We can control the West Bank through police surveillance and nightly raids; we can pacify and bribe West Bankers and Gazans by work permits and limited economic benefits.

No. 4: Oh yes, Hamas: They are in the category of classic terrorist groups, capable of terrible but limited attacks, and we have repeatedly beaten them to a pulp in the past.

No. 5: Rockets, hmmm, yes, huge numbers in Lebanon, lots in the south, but we have the Iron Dome and, if need be, the air force, equipped with the latest F-35 fighter planes from the U.S.

No. 6: America has our back, and is not just concerned with its own interests.

No. 7: The internal political situation, mass demonstrations in the streets, ostensibly about the role of the courts: The country split into ethnic, religious, and economic factions with deep roots in Israel's history.

When these variables overlap, as they did in 1973, and as they do today, attempts at clear analyses can quickly degenerate into bureaucratic battles and conspiracy theories.

Just a few examples: When Egypt engaged in major military maneuvers in September 1973 near the Suez Canal,

“‘Surprise attacks’ are therefore more than simply the products of ‘intelligence failures.’ They signal confusion at the level of societal leadership.”

which looked a lot like practice for crossing and invading, America reassured Israel that these were innocent training exercises. The U.S. then built credibility with Israel by providing the date by which the exercises would end. However, the goal of American policy at the time was to shift Egypt from the Russian camp to the American one—a very complex game. America's goals were therefore to supply both sides with information, keep a grip on Israel, which was a vulnerable dependent, yet help the Israelis enough so that the Russians would not come out winners. The U.S. also regularly warned Israel not to strike first, and thereby alienate “world public opinion” and interfere with America's other regional plans and agendas.

Another example: If Egypt would not attack without the means to control Israel's air force, as the *Konceptsia* insisted, then special attention had to be given to shipments at Russian and Egyptian ports which looked like airplane fuselages; reassuringly, few were found. In this case, Israel's intelligence was entirely correct. But that was because the Egyptians had switched their planning to building up anti-aircraft missile and rocket forces instead of aircraft, and the much smaller shipping packages flowed to Egypt unnoticed.

Still another example: Israeli military intelligence and the Mossad ran their own agents and programs inside Arab countries like Egypt and Syria, and, like security agencies everywhere, they were reluctant to share information—using the desire to maintain secrecy to maintain their monopoly on the information they obtained from their agents. So, military watchers provided increasingly alarming field reports of Egyptian and Syrian movements, while others relied on American assurances, and a “highly reliable” spy embedded in Egypt's leadership who had provided excellent and confidence-building information over a period of years—until, at the key moment, he didn't.

The larger point of these examples is that intelligence hardly exists in a vacuum. It must be interpreted and verified before it can be used. When the dominant *Konceptsia* is set in stone, or becomes a self-reinforcing loop, even “obvious facts” will not make it to the operational level. While the details of who noticed or failed to notice what in any particular instance may seem scandalous or unforgivably stupid in retrospect, their role in the disasters that ultimately happened is likely to have been small.

“Surprise attacks” are therefore more than simply the products of “intelligence failures.” They signal confusion at the level of societal leadership. Are we once again underestimating the technical capability and bravery of the enemy? What are America's real interests in the region, and how are they being expressed? Is repeated war going to provide lasting security? How fragile is Israeli society, and how reliable is our support from American Jews?

As an old man, steeped in Jewish history, skeptical of technologic and diplomatic magic, and noting that God seems to get distracted now and then from the welfare of his people, I worry that these questions weren't asked often or directly enough by Israel's social and political leadership—and I fear that the answers may continue to be painful. ■

This article was originally published on October 13, 2023.

The Writing Is on the Wall for Jewish Students

We must challenge professors and students who tacitly endorse antisemitic violence in the guise of ‘resistance’

BY THOMAS ULLMAN

Today, to be a Jewish student is to be alone. In the wake of Hamas’ devastating attack on Israel in which it brutally massacred over 1,000 Israeli civilians, American universities have proven to be treacherous environments for Jews. Our peers now extol the would-be genocidaires, both in online posts and on stick-mounted signs. We are forced to watch as mobs of students demand the destruction of our homeland. What has been often overlooked by observers of these events, however, is the culpability of the universities themselves. The antisemitism of my classmates did not develop in a vacuum. It is the result of obfuscations by our professors, many of whom have portrayed Hamas as merely a “resistance group,” as well as the refusal of our universities to denounce the terror.

I have had the displeasure of seeing this unfold firsthand. As a Jew and university student in Washington, D.C., I watched as thousands marched in support of the “martyred militants” of Hamas, an organization whose charter explicitly calls for the genocide of Jewry. Dispersed among the crowds were many of my classmates, people whom I once felt I could trust. They shared lunches with me, worked on projects with me, and shared textbooks with me. Now, they celebrate the deaths of people like me. The agitation came to a head last Friday, when a former Hamas leader called for an international “day of

rage,” with the purpose being to extend the reach of the group’s attack to the diaspora. Jewish organizations urged Jewish students to stay home and miss class. I hesitantly did so.

I emerged from my involuntary hiding the next morning and headed for one of the dining halls. I walked warily; every passerby could have been part of the flocks that defended the attacks. On my way there, I crossed paths with a close friend of mine. A student with a fervid interest in progressive politics, he was as compassionate a figure as one could be. I felt the tension immediately evaporate as he approached me with an outstretched hand. Our conversation began with typical niceties, but my heart sank when he told me that he was on his way to a demonstration. I dared not inquire further. I didn’t want to know that he had joined ranks with the bloodthirsty marchers, but he nonetheless found a way to force that fact into the conversation. “I’m glad to see so many people standing up to barbarism and colonialism,” he said at one point, pointing to an anti-Zionist flyer pasted onto a nearby lamppost. I pushed back gently, remarking that child murder wasn’t exactly “standing up to barbarism.” He appeared nonplussed. “Isn’t it rather hard for the Jews,” I asked, “to colonize the land from which they originated?” He stood unspeaking for a moment, as if he were reassessing our friendship. He sneered: “Of course *you’d* say that. You’re a Jew.”

I walked away from our encounter

disoriented. This was an individual who was avowedly “anti-racist.” Hearing antisemitism come out of the mouth of a progressive friend left me dejected. After I returned to my room, I found the same vitriol on social media. Most of my peers had posted some sort of defense of Hamas’ actions, blaming the victim by accusing Israel of igniting this horror. Various student organizations released similar statements online. One popular post from a pro-Palestine student group stated that it “reject[s] the distinction” between civilians and soldiers of the Jewish state. The “decolonial” impetus for the incursion, said the group, was not meant to remain “an abstract academic theory to be discussed and debated ... [it was meant to be] a tangible, material event.” That event turned out to be a pogrom.

The likes on that post numbered nearly 1,000, equivalent to roughly 1 out of 11 undergraduates at my university. Looking through the list, each name that I recognized evoked a gut-wrenching feeling. Even in the comfort of our own rooms, the incitement was inescapable—Jewish students were inundated with hate, both in person and online. The mindless reposting of unoriginal diatribes more than irked me. The acquaintances of mine who did so typically had little knowledge of the conflict, or of international politics in general, and often had no personal stake in the matter. Yet many of them wrote accompanying screeds that justified the attacks. How did they suddenly develop such strong opinions on a conflict taking place 6,000 miles away?

I didn’t have to wait long before my question was answered. A few days ago, every student received an email that advertised a panel discussion about the war. I eagerly opened the message. The panel featured several prominent professors of international affairs and political science, each highly influential in their field. My intrigue quickly faded as I read the description, which characterized Hamas and its cronies as an “array of Palestinian resistance groups.” *Resistance*? That word cannot possibly describe the rapes, executions, and kidnappings that terrorized Israel recently. The term, though incredibly inappropriate,

was unfortunately one that I had seen used repeatedly by professors at my university. One such academic vocally supported the characterization of the attacks as “armed resistance,” adding that it was an “anti-colonial uprising.” This position is widespread and found throughout the country’s colleges, whose administrations have often refused to condemn Hamas. In doing so, American universities lend implicit support not only to these professors’ profane ideas, but to the antisemitism of the students who have adopted them. Our universities have sent a clear message to their students: Genocidal terror is an excusable expression of rage, so long as it is framed as “resistance to colonialism.”

Every time I scroll through the irate posts of student organizations or activists, I am struck by how similar they

sound to the equivocations of our professors. In their online infographics, they palliate Hamas’ crimes in the same way. They refer to the same literature. They use the same slogans. Their arguments have stirred the witless masses into a frenzy with the same idea: Death settles the issue. Only the murder of Jews satisfies the “decolonial” antisemite, whose mouth froths with the same rage that boiled in Europe 90 years ago. This time, though, he makes sure to carefully substitute “Zionist” for “Yid” in his howling tirades. This is a direct consequence of the rhetoric of our professors and the complete indifference of our colleges.

Our academics, who have spent all this time pontificating from their ivory towers, are deserving of blame. They have been entirely disconnected from the impact of their ideas for years.

Now, they are beginning to see the consequences of their words on their own turf. The propagation of support for ethnic hatred must be challenged. As long as American colleges continue to tacitly endorse calls for antisemitic violence, I will continue to earnestly write in defense of the Jewish student.

I walked to class this morning contemplating my experience, one that has now been shared by almost all other young American Jews. As I careened along the sidewalk, I paused in front of a white pillar erected by the university on a patch of soil. The words “May Peace Prevail on Earth” were printed in large black type on its sides. I couldn’t help but expel a bitter laugh. Peace, it seems, comes at the cost of Jewish lives. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Gaza, My Lost Home

There are no sides in this war. There is only mourning.

BY YASMINE MOHAMMED

My father lived his whole life with the hope that there might be a peaceful two-state solution. He spent his last years making YouTube videos on the topic and telling anyone who would listen about his family’s olive groves in Gaza. I am actually kind of relieved that he left this earth before he had to watch Hamas slaughter his dream on video, for all the world to see. Hamas has ensured that there will be no more Palestine, and no more hope for an independent state.

People send flippant messages to me asking “are you pro-Israel or pro-Palestine,” as if we are all watching a football match. Are you wearing a blue

jersey or red? I am wearing neither. I am in black. I am in mourning for the lost Israeli and Palestinian lives. I am in mourning for the Palestine that could have been. With a gorgeous waterfront overlooking the Mediterranean Sea that was recently made safe to swim in, with fertile soil that once sustained ancient olive groves. With land rich with resources for success.

It also had the funding. Generous governments, corporations, nonprofits, and individuals have been flooding the area with billions of dollars for decades. But instead of focusing on a potential tourist industry or building hospitals and schools and helping the Gazan people thrive on the land, the area was overrun by terrorists.

The world knows Hamas now as

terrorists who have committed depraved atrocities that would even make ISIS blush. But the people of Gaza already knew them. They have been suffering in relative silence under these monsters for years. Anytime a Gazan dares to raise their voice in criticism, their throat is slit immediately, making it brutally obvious that it’s best to keep quiet. Even those who hated Hamas chanted their allegiance to them loudly, in fear of their lives and their family’s lives.

Fellow Islamic regimes like Iran and Afghanistan are reveling in the rivers of Israeli blood. They do not see Jewish people as humans. They see them as things that need to be eradicated, as per the Hadith by their Prophet Muhammad which instructs them that Muslims must kill Jews until not one Jew is standing. Even the rocks and the trees will work with the Muslims against Jews, Muhammad teaches, calling out, “Oh Muslim, there is a Jew hiding behind me! Come kill him!”

Even in Egypt, a supposedly more progressive Muslim majority country, a police officer took it upon himself to murder two Israeli tourists who were visiting ancient ruins in Alexandria. He

killed their guide too, who was probably trying to protect them. The tourist industry has been relatively nonexistent in Egypt due first to the revolution and then the pandemic. Now the country is suffering greatly under soaring inflation that is threatening lives daily. And yet, killing Jews was more important.

I never shared my father's optimism. I never could imagine the two states living side by side. The past 75 years have been delaying the inevitable. These two Abrahamic faiths hate each other, and the only way there could have ever been hope is if both groups progressed beyond their ancient books. But both sides did the opposite. Israel has been pulled further and further into the Orthodox right wing and Gaza has become more and more extremist,

electing terrorists who follow a literal interpretation of the ancient scriptures. There could have been hope 70 years ago, when Israel was being founded by secular hippies and terrorists had not yet overrun Gaza, but the writing has been on the wall for a long time now, and the mercury has been rising for decades.

Almost all of my father's family is scattered across the globe, like most Palestinians. There are second and third generations being born in the diaspora with no connection to the land anymore. This is not new for the Middle East: Jewish people with roots in every country from Algeria to Yemen have been all but eradicated from their homelands; Egypt has very few people remaining from the hundreds

of thousands who once thrived there. Hopefully a few Gazans will remain in Gaza. Maybe someday they'll be able to live on their homeland without fear.

I have never been to Gaza, and my children have never been to Gaza. Maybe my grandchildren might go one day and read a plaque on some ancient monument that describes how this used to be the land of a people who called themselves Palestinians. They had a rich culture. Delicious food. Beautiful, bright clothing. Now they do not have a homeland anymore because they chose violence over peace. Despite the abundance of olive branches in Gaza, they chose to extend a knife instead. ■

This article was originally published on October 11, 2023.

COMMUNITY

Talking to Your Kids About What's Happening in Israel

A chat with clinical psychologist Esther Altmann to help parents who are unsure what to say—and what not to say

BY JAMIE BETESH CARTER

This week I'm really struggling. My family is from Israel, and it feels extremely difficult to find the time to process what's happening as a person, and especially as a parent. On top of this overwhelming feeling of sadness, stress, and helplessness, my husband and I are trying to figure out how to explain to our children why we're sad and what's going on in Israel while also being their emotional center, and their pillar of strength. I feel extremely grateful to be able to

tuck my healthy, beautiful children in at night. And yet I find myself distracted and sneaking away to read the news. I'm walking around with a very, very dark cloud over my head while trying to be a present and happy mother. And from what I understand, I'm not alone.

When Tablet announced that I'd be hosting a Zoom conversation with Dr. Esther Altmann about how parents outside Israel can talk to their kids about what's happening in Israel right now, more than 500 people from all over the world registered in a matter of hours. Altmann is a clinical psychologist in

private practice who works with adolescents, young adults, older adults, and couples. She's the director of pastoral education at Yeshivat Maharat Rabbinical School. She joined us for an hour on Wednesday night to help parents navigate this week's events, and figure out how to talk about them with their kids.

We learned about different coping mechanisms and strategies to use. We learned that in order to be emotionally available for our children, we have to learn how to calm ourselves. We learned to trust our own instincts, as the experts for our own individual children. We discussed our fears, and most importantly, our hopes for the future. We were happy to not feel alone, and were thankful to have a place to be in conversation about how difficult our jobs as parents feel right now.

Below is a transcript of that conversation, which has been lightly edited for clarity.

Jamie Betesh Carter: Some of us are parents. We are adults. And we carry an enormous mental load, often feeling exhausted and depleted by the end of each day and taking care of other people and ourselves. How can we as parents help our kids process this when we haven't necessarily had the time, space,

or capacity to process it for ourselves right now?

Esther Altmann: I have the greatest empathy for people who are caring for children and young children right now. My children are in the post-college young adulthood stage, and I can say that I really do not think that when I was raising my children, when they were going through lower school and middle school and high school, the external world was as distressed and conflicted and worrisome as it is today. There is a qualitative shift that we're all reacting to, and we need to start there. I don't need to go through the long list of things that are on our minds like climate change and gun violence and the war in Ukraine. And we're just coming out of the post-COVID years with all of its mental health and physical health sequelae. So there's all of that. But even in a much smaller way, I was mindful to give you one little example of some of what was happening, just going to synagogue on the High Holidays where already we were told that there's going to be extra security. Even that elevates and escalates our nervous system as adults. And so we are in that environment. I don't know about you, but I wake up in the morning, I have my cup of coffee and I say, do I want to read the news or do I want to do Spelling Bee? What way do I want to distract and manage my emotional experience before I let in what is going on in the outside world? That was our baseline that was happening before Saturday, before the war in Israel. I want to acknowledge that that's the external world. We each have our own health challenges or crises or things going on in our immediate families, in particular nuclear families that are stressful and difficult to manage on a day-to-day. So we have the external world, we have our own nuclear families and extended families that we're worrying about on any given day. And then Saturday happened.

One of my first thoughts was I cannot take in the fact that something else terrible, frightening and terrifying is now going on in the world. I think as parents, as adults, we have to regulate or—I noticed I just put my hand on my heart, which I did actually intuitively,

“What should I say? Maybe you're going to be annoyed with me, but I'm going to tell parents who are asking those questions, check in with yourself and trust yourself.”

I did not do that very consciously. But how do we slow down our heart rates? How do we regulate ourselves? I know parents are going to want to know about social media and their kids. But I have found myself talking with my very adult, very smart, very successful patients over the last few days about their own social media use and about the fact that their brains, our brains, can only take in a certain amount of distressing information and certainly visual information. So those visual images of people getting pulled and young people getting kidnapped. Those are things that if we were seeing them over and over again, and we're seeing multiple ones of them, our brains are going to go into a freeze, our sympathetic systems are going to go into an overdrive, and then our system needs to metabolize traumatic images and that takes energy and effort. We don't even know that that's going on, but it is actually going on in us and it shrinks our capacity to be available interpersonally, both to people we may want to be reaching out to in Israel and most importantly, to our children. So I think our very first step is to monitor our own social media usage.

J.B.C.: What a lot of us are struggling with is a lot of people saying to really delete or monitor social media. Why are we glued to the news? We do want

to know what's happening and we do want to also share what's happening to help others understand the extent of this, but also, respect what you're saying, regulate our own systems and be available for our children. What's the right balance there? I don't think a lot of people want to turn it off completely because they want to be tuned in to the unfolding. But how can we manage those two desires?

E.A.: Each person needs to figure it out for themselves—there's work, there's parenting, there is getting the groceries, and there's staying on top of what's going on in Israel. Any time there is tragedy or war that's close to us, we want to be more immersed in it. When it comes to Israel in particular for some of us—not for all of us but for those of us who may be Israelis who are living here in America and have left or have very close family there or feel that they should have made aliyah and didn't or have this kind of very wedded, identified connection to Israel—there's a fantasy that if we listen to the news, it's almost like being there. It's almost like we are identifying with the feelings and experiences of the Israelis who we care about and love. And somehow that is being with them. I understand that need completely. And sometimes some of us may feel guilty. There they are. We're here. We're not worried about our life in the same way. And that can be really hard. For some of us, not for all of us, we feel guilty. They're there and we're here. That doesn't seem quite right. So that's one thing that maybe influences how much we're on the news. There's almost magical thinking if we can continue to monitor what's going on, it gives us some imagined sense also of control. And the idea that we really don't have any control, no matter how much we watch the news of what is actually going to unfold, that is another source of anxiety and pain.

J.B.C.: We will talk more about social media, but what I want to focus on now is the coping strategies and the coping mechanisms. And how do we help our kids cope and how do we cope?

E.A.: Parents, you know your children very well. When I work with parents,

I pay very close attention to what parents tell me about their children. You are experts in your children and you can take advice or recommendations from the schools or things that you might be reading. And I think it's very important for you to filter it into what you know about your child and modify accordingly. Children have different coping strategies. I'm going to talk about four different kinds of coping strategies. Of course, it's not that neat. As I go through them, they may capture what you know about your child or how you understand how your child copes with difficult or challenging information in the world.

I'm going to start with the catastrophizers. These are children who like to collect a lot of detailed information. They may be asking you a lot of questions about what is going on in Israel. And no matter what you say to them, they're going to ask another question and another question. And sometimes I think we think when children have this style, that the more we answer, at some point they're going to say, OK, and that's going to help them. But with children like this, what often happens is the more questions they ask, the more information we give them, the more they escalate up, the more anxious they get, and then the more questions they ask. So at some point, you have to identify that pattern and realize that you're not going to continue the dialogue. You're going to try to contain it. And you really need to shift them either to a soothing activity or to eat dinner or sometimes

“For those parents who are worried about what exactly should they say, I want to remind them that, number one, children are resilient.”

you actually have to say, I think we've talked about this enough, now let's figure out what else we can do or what else we should talk about. You actually have to be very specific with them. So that's one kind of coping mechanism.

Other children are called sensitizers, and children who are sensitizers are going to ask for *some* information. They might want to know some details. And when you answer them, it seems to help them. It seems to contain their interest, their knowledge, their worries, their fears. And after a certain amount of back and forth, they're going to go, OK, and they can go do their homework. They can go play. They can go do something else. You want to make sure to check back in with them, to see exactly how they've taken in the information you've shared. You may have had the best intentions. Maybe it was a little too much. Maybe they need to know a little more. Maybe their imaginations are going a little. You want to check in to know what they're thinking, where did they take it, where did it go? So those might be the way I might interact or parent somebody who is more of sensitizer. Of course, I think we all want to be sensitizers. That seems to be the most adaptive coping strategy.

And as I'm going through these, you may recognize yourself, you may

recognize your partner. After over 30 years of being in private practice and working with so many people across the life span, it's not clear to me why some of us are catastrophizers, and some of us are sensitizers.

The third category is minimizers. These are children who very quickly want to shut down the conversation. They want to minimize the information that they're taking in because it's going to arouse their anxiety and uncertainty. And they tend to process information slowly and in small little bits. So if you have a child who is a minimizer, you're going to say just a couple of things, essential facts that you think they need to know. They're going to take that in. Then you can come back and then maybe add in some other pieces of information you think that they ought to be knowing about what's going on in Israel. They can also come back to you when they want more information. And you can take that as a cue that they're ready to open up and take in more.

And then lastly, the deniers, the children who actively push information out of their minds. They don't want to think or talk about anything that's upsetting and that's their way of protecting themselves.

Again, as I was going through this, you may have said, oh, that's me or that's my partner. I do couples therapy. And some people are sensitizers or catastrophizers, and their partner may be a minimizer or a denier. And one person wants to talk and the other person doesn't want to talk. That can also be a source of tension. It's helpful to know, even as a parent, where you might fit in in terms of your own coping strategies, where your child fits in and also where your partner, if you have a partner, where your partner fits in, too, because that's also going to be going on in the dynamic of your family. It's not only parent to child, but if you're partnered, it's partner to partner as well. It's all in the mix.

J.B.C.: To build on that, we're all craving a way to make it make sense for ourselves. To explain this in a way to our children that not only makes them feel safe as people, but to reassure their sense of Jewish pride. And if they don't

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identify as Jewish, to help them understand what their Jewish friends are going through. And for most people, really doesn't make Israel feel like a scary word or scary place, especially if they have family there or if they've been there, they will go there again. How do we do that in a way that tries to keep that sense of pride and sympathy?

E.A.: Depending on what your children know about Israel, you certainly want to start there. If they've been to Israel, one of the things I might ask them is what did they remember about their trip to Israel, for example, to talk about positive experiences? If they were fortunate enough to have spent some time there, what do you remember about Israel that you really loved? What was the best thing that we did when we went? So for those people who have had opportunities to be in Israel, that might be a good place to start.

I want to offer a framing by Jonathan Goldin at the Hartman Institute that I thought was helpful that we could employ with our children of all ages in terms of their relationship to Israel. He talks about head, heart, and hands. We want to ask our kids, what do you understand about Israel? What is Israel? Depending on the age of your child, when did Israel come into existence? Some historical facts. What's your understanding? Who lives in Israel? There are many different kinds of people who live in Israel. If your child doesn't know so much, you can just talk about Israel as a country, the people of Israel, and how it came into being. So that's our head. That's knowledge, which I think is useful.

Our hearts are: What do we feel about Israel and why do we care about it? And who do we care for in Israel? Who are the people that we meet? Is there a friend that we went to school with who was from Israel who then went back to Israel? Are we worried about that person? Can we send an email message to that friend and check in and see how they're doing? For a child in lower school, that might be a very nice way of connecting to somebody that they know. Can you send a letter?

And the hand would be thinking about what can we do? How can we help

“We don't need to be perfect parents. We just need to be good enough parents.”

people who are living in Israel and going through this terrible, horrific time? And again we can talk about ages, right? Teenagers can do all kinds of things. In fact, I was listening to a group of women in Israel across the country talking about how in their communities, the teenagers were shopping and baking and babysitting and taking over and basically running the community while parents were away, were called to duty, and the women were doing a million other things. So that the teenagers were running the community in so many different ways. It gave them a great sense of purpose and certainly was helpful in managing their fears. We're not structured that way. We are going about our daily routines. Our children are in school. We're trying to do our work, so we're not going to stop everything. But I definitely think that for children at different ages, asking them and helping to think with them about what they can do, what acts of kindness or charity to help is a very good way of helping them cope with the situation.

J.B.C.: I'm not sure if you feel equipped to do this, but do we want to quickly just talk about the three big age groups—preschool, elementary school, and teenagers—and some terms, phrases, and words to use that explain what's happening?

E.A.: Well, for preschool kids, I would wonder what other reference points they have. In other words, do they know the word war? And you know that there are wars in different parts of the world. There's a war in Ukraine. Is that something already in their vocabulary or is the word war not yet in their vocabulary? I know it's so painful for parents when we have to talk to our children about the tragedies of the world. But we do have to start some time and we do have to talk about these things. So it's not inappropriate for 4- and 5-year-olds and 6-year-olds to know that there is something about war. And we can talk about the fact that kids in their class fight. And why do kids in their class fight? Sometimes people get angry with each other. Sometimes they're fighting over a toy. People fight over toys and people fight over land. A war in Israel is a fight over land. And it's different from fighting over a toy. But it might not be so different on some other level. I'm just thinking out loud with you, but that might be one way to frame it for a preschooler.

I would be careful to be mindful of what they are hearing in school and checking in with their teachers. I'm sure some of the schools are wonderful in keeping parents very informed about what happened in the class and what they talked about and some of the questions that the children had. When you get that information in the school, it's enormously helpful. And I know some of you are probably in schools where you're not getting any information, you really don't know much of anything of what's going on for your preschool child. But checking in with teachers is always a good idea when you can in terms of elementary school children they know a lot and they see a lot. I would circle back to what I said about who your child is and what is most helpful for them in terms of information in the world. Is it better to talk more about it or is it better to talk less about it? I would certainly be checking in every day. Did this come up? What came up? You want to talk about it? Do you not want to talk about it? How are you feeling? One thing that I think we've certainly all experienced is when there's something really weighing

on our hearts that is painful. For example, if somebody in our family is sick or we've had a loss, we go out into the world and we feel different. And you feel like, don't you know that I'm fundamentally changed? I'm buying milk and I'm doing my job and inside I feel like a totally different person. Some of us have had that experience now with Israel. When we go into environments where people are not thinking about this and we're like, don't you understand? There's tragedy and crisis in Israel and this is the only thing I can be thinking about. But for the other person, it's just how are you today? For some of our kids and some of their school environments, they may be feeling like that. So it's particularly important to create opportunities, environments for them to share, share in the conversation in whatever your Jewish communal affiliation might be. Maybe this is the time you really want to put together a Friday night dinner for your children and invite a couple of other families and feel like this is a place and a space where people can share what it's been like for them, middle schoolers and high schoolers. It's such a huge conversation.

With some of our kids, particularly in school age kids and middle schoolers, there is often a discrepancy between their cognitive development and their emotional development. And again, you as parents are attuned to this. They may be so intellectually sophisticated in terms of the information they're taking in and what they know. But their emotional capacity to manage that information may be much more limited. That is where you as a parent can really be in dialogue with them and try and help them manage their emotional experience. There are these developmental discrepancies across different capacities that children have. And it can often be asynchronous, which is something to be mindful of.

J.B.C.: In just a few days since this started, Jewish spaces are already feeling and looking different, there's extra security, there are police cars outside schools. People are talking about different things. We're just a few days into this, but how do we explain that? How do we make sure people understand

that we're trying to be as safe as possible here, even though something is happening far away? People in the messages are conveying that there are real threats to our communities here in America. And so that's a whole other conversation. And I'm curious how we approach that.

E.A.: Full disclosure, I'm the child of a Holocaust survivor and Auschwitz survivor who lost everyone and was devastated by the time he was 18. I'm sharing that information because, yes, what does it mean to be Jewish in the world and to be vulnerable? And we always want to push off that conversation with our kids. When do you introduce the Holocaust? When do you talk about the idea that people hate Jews? There is no good explanation for it, right? If you have an older child, you can ask them what their understanding is of that and why. We don't have good explanations for evil in the world and hatred in the world. I will leave that to the philosophers and the theologians, we can't answer that question for our kids. We can listen to what they are thinking and asking. So if there's security in front of the school that wasn't there before, I would do my best to try and reassure. I would say the security is there to help everyone stay safe. The truth of the matter is, to the best of my understanding, kids have lockdown procedures [in school] in case there is gun violence. So on the one hand we feel that we are particularly victimized as Jews, and it's very painful and very hard, in each generation. Like can't there be a generation where you don't have to grapple with antisemitism? Can't there be a generation where Israelis don't have to go to war? You know, it brings tears for many of us I know have been weeping. And again, we go back to monitoring ourselves. But I think what's really important is to know that this is in the context of many other difficult things that our children are facing. So be really calm about it. There's the police car there because sometimes it feels like places need extra protection and the police car is there to just look out for you. And I would be, as a matter of fact, as possible to go back to the coping style. If your child is a catastrophizer, that child may ask you more questions. The child who

is a minimizer may not even notice. Some kids notice everything and some kids notice nothing. So for the kid who notices very little, you certainly don't want to call attention to the police.

J.B.C.: There is a big difference between those who pick up on something and hear something and come to us. What we're seeing here is a lot of people's children know nothing, and it's up to us to start the conversation. We know the different coping strategies in different age groups. Are there one or two things that you would suggest starting the conversation with? Is there anything that you would recommend doing to open it up in a way that again, makes children feel safe sharing as well?

E.A.: I would use the word war in Israel. There is a war in Israel right now again. I would not say that to toddlers. But if you think your kids are going to be hearing things on TV, it's a reminder also to be mindful of when your TV is on and the kids are running around and what they may be saying. I'm sure most parents are aware, but I'm reminding them. But you can say there are wars, when countries fight and people fight and people are injured and hurt and there is a war in Israel and we are worried and concerned. And if you notice that I'm upset or sad today, it's because there's a war in Israel and it's really on my mind and then see what the child says or asks or does with that information. I think that's a reasonable way to start and then see what your child wants to know.

J.B.C.: The other question that some people have is about the children who do tend toward anxious behavior. Is there anything you want to briefly share about what to or what not to say to children who are in that realm?

E.A.: I think I want to shift the conversation a little bit. I'm hearing a lot of: What should I say? Maybe you're going

HISTORY

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to be annoyed with me, but I'm going to tell parents who are asking those questions, check in with yourself and trust yourself. You will figure out what to say. You don't need me as the expert to tell you exactly what sentences to use. I want you to feel like you have the capacity to figure that out for yourselves. But what I would say to you is pay attention to your children's behaviors. Some children are somaticizers. Are you hearing about stomach aches? Is their sleep disrupted? If they were toilet trained, are they having more accidents? I would start to pay attention to those behaviors. Are they fighting or are they grouchy or are they coming into your bed? Are there signs of stress or distress that they're manifesting? This is sadly, probably, going to be a long haul. And then you need to be sensitive to the fact that they may be having a regression in their toilet training and they may be more difficult or obstinate or whatever it is. They're driving you crazy in whatever style they find to make parenting challenging. There may be something on their minds. They're picking up on the fact that something bad is going on or if you have a close relative in Israel they may really be worried about their grandparents or their cousin, whoever might be there. And are they safe and are they OK, trying to actually put somebody on the phone or have a conversation or Zoom, depending on the situation of your family member in Israel. These are all things that could be helpful for your child. Try and check in with what their fantasy is. Children have such unbelievably creative imaginations and we never know what they're actually imagining. And so having a reality check to be able to check in with what they're imagining, I think is really important and helpful.

J.B.C.: There was a statement made or put out today by many different schools and communities to anticipate what images might be coming out of what Hamas might be releasing and what gruesome images might be released, basically a call for parents to strictly either monitor their news and their children's news intake/social media use or cut it off. And that can bring up a lot of loss of

“Is it hard to feel anger or is it hard to feel fear?”

power for kids. I'm curious what your thoughts are on how to handle that.

I saw these things flash across my screen in the middle of my day and I thought, oh my goodness, how are parents possibly going to do this? It creates an enormous pressure. I don't currently have teenagers. I don't know how you quite control your teenagers' social media use. Certainly you want to be speaking to them. You do want to get advice on how to shut down their social media. You want to be clear with them that this isn't a battle over their autonomy, their independence. And one way I might be inclined, I'm talking specifically about teenagers, is to tell them that *you* are not going to be watching these images. You are containing your social media because you understand that these images are traumatizing and not healthy. We want our kids to be able to take the trauma of this experience in Israel and be connected to other people. To be in conversation. And if their brains freeze because these images are going to be seen over and over again, there's a fantasy that if we continue to see an image, the kids think they're going to be able to manage it better. In other words, it's almost exposure therapy for a phobia. But we don't really want either ourselves or our kids to be deadened by these horrific images. You can say to your teenager, I'm

not doing this. If you're going to take control away, then I'm doing this for this very particular reason. I'm hoping this is a very short-term. I really encourage check-ins with your parent buddies. How are they doing it? What are they doing? And for parents of teenagers, one thing that's really important. Don't rely on your kids to say, well, so-and-so's parent is not shutting down their media. So why are you shutting down mine if so-and-so's parent is letting them go to the party. Why can't I go to the party? Or if his curfew is 2 a.m., why is mine midnight? It's really helpful to be checking in with other parents, get support from other parents about how to do this. So, yes, please control those images for your kids, for *yourself*, to not see them.

Also I just want to take a step back and think about how it's another kind of terror to be putting that out into the world. And we don't want to be colluding with that. That's another way to think about it. And then the other part of this and maybe this is something I think middle schoolers and high schools will appreciate. There's something about human dignity. This is a Jewish value. There might be an opportunity here to talk with older children, about how we deal with the ritual of death and mourning and bodies. We show great honor to our bodies when we die. There's a *chevra kadisha*. We watch over them, we cleanse them, we bury them, we put earth on them, we honor them. These are images that are dishonoring. And it's not a Jewish value to watch them. And that might help them feel like, oh it's more respectful not to be seeing these images.

J.B.C.: Someone asked why we can't forgive the terrorists.

E.A.: The phrase that comes to mind is there's a time for everything. There's a time for healing, there's a time for forgiveness. And I'm wondering about the teenager asking that question now. I would wonder about, is it hard to feel anger or is it hard to feel fear? Is there a way in which moving quickly to forgiveness is skipping over very painful feelings that are hard to hold? And I would talk about needing time for forgiveness. For example, we can look at how Germany has dealt with the Holocaust. It's actually a beautiful example

of moving through stages of reconciliation and forgiveness over time. Right now, we are too in the experience to be talking about forgiveness. And for that particular child asking that question, that may be how they're coping with it, which is also OK, you want to be sensitive to that. But that's my thought. I just want to skip over all of this pain and horror and just move on to this later stage, which we're not quite in yet, sadly.

J.B.C.: In that vein, someone's asking about how we approach talking about Palestinians who don't identify as Hamas. This is probably for an older age group, but how do we address the innocent civilians and those stories will be coming out soon, in the coming days?

E.A.: There are good people everywhere. And the world is random. Again, I would defer to the rabbis and the educators and the wise souls. These are questions really beyond my capacity as a psychologist. Why is there evil in the world in which good people get hurt? And the idea of holding the fact that there are truly good people everywhere. I happen to know that the Museum of Jewish Heritage, for those people who were in New York, or are going to be coming to New York anytime soon, is launching the first ever children's Holocaust exhibit. And it is about the Danish rescuers during the Holocaust. So that's a wonderful exhibit to go take your kids to, a reminder that in the throes of the Holocaust, the Danes rescued their

Jews. There are good people everywhere. And that's a perfect antidote. It couldn't have been more timely.

J.B.C.: There are really heroic stories coming out where grandfathers came to the rescue of their grandchildren. There are the good people that helped save many people from massacre. Is that something you recommend discussing with kids to show them the positivity and the heroes in this? Is that something that you think is a good framing for children to see that there is good in the world and that there is some hope that's coming out to look for the helpers?

E.A.: Yeah, that's a great phrase. Thank you for that. Yes, of course. Can I circle back to something else around the parenting? For those parents who are worried about what exactly they should say, or how they should say it, I want to remind us that, number one, children are resilient. They're very resilient. And secondly, there's the concept of a "good enough parent," developed by Winnicott, who was a British psychoanalyst. And I'm sure many of you have heard about this concept. We don't need to be perfect parents. We just need to be good enough parents. I want to remind you about that as I can hear by your questions and just by virtue of being on this Zoom you're a good parent because you're on this Zoom and you're trying to figure out how to best help your kids. I want to encourage you to feel secure in your parenting and to know that you don't have to get it exactly right.

J.B.C.: Thank you. Our discussion earlier just made me really thankful that you're here. And I know we want to end on hope and resilience. I think you had a great idea to ask of the group and I'll ask of you how can we help instill hope in our kids when we at this moment may doubt it?

E.A.: I would also circle back to something you asked me a little earlier about. I would turn to Jewish rituals. Those that you find comforting, and asking your children, or introducing, perhaps is a great opportunity to particularly counteract any sort of negative antisemitic things that may be coming their way. How do we affirm positive Jewish identities and how do Jewish rituals provide us comfort? So I noticed myself, I had an *etrog* from Sukkot that I love the smell of. It's Jewish aromatherapy. Smell your *etrog* if you still have one. This Shabbat, have a beautiful meal, light candles, bake challah. Ask your child what they like to do that they associate with being Jewish. What's meaningful to them. Give *tzedakah*, give charity, whatever it might be. I remember when my kids were little and there was the horrific tsunami in 2004 that killed, I think, a quarter-million people. We made a lemonade stand and we raised money. It just felt like doing something active with your child. I think this is an opportune moment. ■

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STONE COLD TRUTH

Tablet

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