



Policy Forum

The New Middle East: Hamas Attack, Israel at War, and U.S. Policy

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ROBERT SATLOFF: Good afternoon and welcome to The Washington Institute. I'm Rob Satloff, the director of the Institute, and I appreciate you joining me for this very special event. At the outset of today's event, on behalf of myself, on behalf of all my colleagues here at the Washington Institute, I want to extend our condolences to the innocent victims of last weekend's horrific terrorist attack by Hamas: 900 or so Israelis, and others from around the world including what appears to be eleven confirmed Americans. To all of them, to their families, to the people of Israel, to all civilized people around the world outraged by what we have seen, the barbarity of what we have seen this weekend, I extend our deepest condolences.

I believe that there's an inflection point in the Middle East at the moment that is analogous to the inflection point of 9/11 and this will require us to rethink many of the presumptions the basic

paradigm with which we here in the United States, many of us as experts, approached politics society and conflict in the region. I'm going to introduce our panelists in just a moment. We have a terrific group today. This is the first of a series of sessions that we'll be doing here at the Washington Institute to analyze, assess, and offer advice to our administration on events in the region, but before I do, I want to take that metaphor and expand it.

Yes. In terms of certain aspects -- intelligence failure, the speed, the scope, the audacity -- of what we saw over this weekend, yes, the metaphor is apt. But in many ways, I think it's so important to underscore that the metaphor, in fact, is not adequate. Certainly, if you're Israeli to comprehend the impact and the meaning of what happened this weekend. Let me just offer this handful of reasons, six brief reasons, why the 9/11 metaphor in fact is not adequate.

First the numbers: Proportionately to population, the number killed in Israel were ten times the number killed in 9/11. Ten times.

Secondly the intensity. Israel is a small country. You can drive Israel in half a day compared of course to the length and breadth of our great nation. While what happened on 9/11 was the most heinous sort of attack, tens of millions of Americans could wake up the next morning without knowing anyone who suffered that day. That's impossible in Israel where there's not a single Israeli family who could wake up the next day without knowing someone who suffered or someone who was deployed in the army as a response.

Third. If you'll excuse me, sexual violence. The element of rape as part of what happened this weekend just underscores the depth of the depravity that we saw.

Fourth. Terrorists continued to operate on Israeli soil for multiple days and some, I believe, are still there today although I think that is about to come to an end. So the length of time of this episode makes it fundamentally different.

Fifth: Hostages, mass hostages taken across borders, an element that never before played a role in the hundred-year history of this conflict and an element that is extremely rare in any conflict. I had to go back to the first Chechen War to find examples of large-scale taking of hostages across borders.

And then six. As we eventually learned in 9/11 that the day was the high point of the enemy's action. We all feared that there may have been more but, in the end, there wasn't and America and its allies went on the offensive from that point on. I think we all recognize and we're going to talk today and in future days about this what is going on between Hamas and Israel is potentially the first round of a much larger conflict and that of course could change even more.

So the 9/11 metaphor is useful but limited in its utility and I think we have to change our mindset to begin to comprehend what this does to the people and the leaders of Israel and what it does to people around the Middle East looking at how the Israelis are going to respond.

In addition to analogies, there are many analogies this week to the October War exactly fifty years ago in 1973. And indeed from this very table, I hosted an event on the question of strategic surprise during which none of my fellow panelists, myself included, anticipated what was going to happen just hours later. Yes, the surprise was great, and, as in 1973, the Israelis were not deployed properly to be ready for a surprise but that analogy breaks down too. As we know, Sadat launched a war to catalyze peace and the result was Camp David and, years later, Egypt and Israel are still at peace. Hamas did not start this to catalyze peace. Hamas did not start this to create a two-state solution. Hamas did not start this to energize a dormant peace process in my view, and we'll get into this with all my colleagues. Just very briefly, Hamas started this for three reasons: To activate a multifront threat to Israel; Second, to fill a vacuum in Palestinian leadership; and third, to stop the march toward regional peace, including the Saudi-Israeli agreement about which there was so much talk in recent weeks.

So let me repeat the obvious: Not only are we not seeing just another phase of the Gaza-Hamas-Israel conflict that we've seen periodically in recent years, we're seeing something fundamentally different and we're seeing an Israeli response that will be fundamentally different, too. In that I know the hostage issues play a huge role but, in my view, if I have outlined what I believe Hamas's aims are, here's what I believe Israel's aims will be in the coming period. First, to decapitate Hamas military leadership and to destroy residual military capability. Second, to instill confidence among the Israeli people once again that the government of Israel and the IDF provide for their security, confidence that has been sorely shaken in recent days. Third, to replace in the minds of regional actors, friends, foes, and would-be friends, the perception of Israeli vulnerability and weakness that was produced over the weekend and replace it with the idea of Israeli power, dominance, and invincibility. Indeed, I would just not discount the psychological aspect of all this. I think it is critical all of this augers for a substantial military effort one that won't be over soon.

Hovering over all this, and what you will hear today and in the coming days and weeks here at the Washington Institute, is the threat of wider circles of conflict, an inner circle that includes the Palestinian arena, Jerusalem, West Bank, and Israeli Arabs. A second circle of what I'll call "near regionals:" Hezbollah, Syria, potentially a related security challenge in other places such as Jordan if Islamist extremists and Palestinian radicals try to test the regime a test, I believe the Jordanians would win. And then the wider circle: Iran.

Let me just conclude these introductory remarks by noting that America has a vital role to play in all of this. What we saw this weekend was not just an Israeli tragedy, it was the most significant act of terror against Americans outside U.S. soil since September 11. For Hamas, a radical Sunni group, one of the very few rationales for making common ground with the radical Shiite group, Hezbollah, or the radical Shiite regime of Iran, where do they have common ground? It is their fight against the great Satan and their fight against the Lesser Satan. Israel, we should remind everyone, is the Lesser Satan. America, Israel's friend, ally, and supporter, has always been the great Satan. We cannot run from that reality. Neither, I should say, can America's Arab friends run from it. They weren't the direct targets of Hamas but if Israel is weakened they become more vulnerable. That explains in my view the generally lukewarm and equivocal statements that we've seen from Arab capitals when Israel appears vulnerable. They will look for cover. Reestablishing the fact, and the image, of Israeli strength is in their interest, which makes it in our interest, too.

I look forward to discussing all these issues with my colleagues. today we're focused on the inner core: The Hamas attack, Israel's response, and its implications. As I said before, we'll be having another event on Thursday to look at the potential for escalation on the northern front and further programming. Please go to the Washington Institute website to learn about that.

I'm delighted that from Israel is joining us our Lafer International Fellow, Ehud Yaari. Then I'm going to turn to the director of our Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence our Fromer-Wexler Fellow Dr. Matthew Levitt. I'm really thrilled and fortunate that at the moment we have as a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute, Neomi Neumann, who, until not too long ago, was director of research at the Israeli Security Agency, the Shin Bet, which has authority and responsibility to keep an eye on Palestinian territories. And we also have my colleague Ghaith al-Omari, the Gilbert Senior Fellow here at the Washington Institute, an expert on Palestinian politics.

EHUD YAARI: Thank you, Rob, for your wise comments. Usually, I'm blunt and this evening I'm not going to mince words. I take it from my mother, who is 104 years old, that this is the darkest moment that she remembers in the history of Israel since the darkest days of the War of Independence in 1948. The second point is that we are already in the midst of a multi-front confrontation of different intensities on different fronts. In my family's home village of Metula, the northernmost point of Israel, they are telling everybody who doesn't really have a good reason to stay there to evacuate. The same goes for many other villages and kibbutzim and townlets all around the north.

My nephew just came from Thailand and went to his brigade in the north. If I may have an open disclosure, in the kibbutz called Kfar Aza where my childhood friends from the youth movement settled many years ago, dozens were killed. Forty babies, not even toddlers, were massacred; many of them were beheaded. What we saw there is Einsatzgruppen disguised as Hamas. That's what it was and this is how most Israelis see it.

Now, Israel probably had enough information to know that there was an attack coming. Military Intelligence didn't have the zero hour, just like on the eve of the 1973 War, but they knew and they saw the preparations. And again, like in 1973, we have two peacock generals at Military Intelligence who should've known better and decided that our policy since 2009 of getting along with Hamas through economic benefits and the occasional round of fighting was working. They said no, it will be fine. What happened was that the fence around Gaza, which spans 70 kilometers and in some areas is just a fence, was unguarded by the Gaza division and the Firefox division. When you try to defend 70 kilometers with three companies it's not going to work, and of course, it didn't.

There was one place that gives an example of how the Hamas attack should have developed. In one of the affected areas, what Israelis call the Gaza envelope, out of roughly twenty-two kibbutzim and villages, which are now destroyed and burned down, only one remains almost intact because they had a young woman heading the local security squad who understood before anybody else in the army what was happening. She had their alert squad spread around the perimeter and prevented the Hamas killers from coming into the kibbutz and doing what they did in Kfar Aza and Be'eri:

Going house to house butchering people. That's the scene and this is why my mother is saying what she said. Even in the War of Independence we never had anything like this.

Second thing: Why were the intelligence chiefs so wrong? Because since 2009 they came to believe the status quo works. If we allow Gazan workers to come to Israel and provide fuel and Qatari money, then there will be stability. The Intelligence Chiefs, like in 1973, were married to these conceptions.

So when Hamas, facing Israeli technological superiority, came over the fence with motorized gliders and tractors there was nobody to stop them. The distance between the fence and the roughly twenty-two kibbutzim and eleven army positions is very short. It was not just two battalion commanders of Hamas that crossed – probably the only two battalion commanders they have – many Gazans were coming to plunder and on the way they took some hostages. That's the scene and it took hours to intervene.

We had women soldiers manning the positions that monitor the cameras and the sensors along the fence. At least two dozen of them were butchered in their positions because there was no buffer. That's very difficult for any Israeli to accept and understand.

Now less emotion. I beg everybody's pardon. I believe, and I don't have the proof yet but I will have it, this was orchestrated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards through the visits of the Quds Force Commander General Esmail Qaani to Beirut and Damascus to derail progress toward an Israeli-Saudi normalization. The Iranians perceived a move in this direction as a direct, serious threat. They did not want to allow it.

Now Hamas. I have known Yahya Sinwar since his days in prison. I used to have many conversations with him in prison. Sinwar didn't want to have a fight in Israel on his own. So, my assumption, I will have evidence later on I'm sure, was the Iranians and Hezbollah were saying to him through the people they were talking to in Beirut that in case the knife is on your throat – in case the Israeli army invades Gaza – there will be the activation of a Lebanese front and, to a lesser extent, a Syrian front.

On the Lebanese front, we receive rocket fire every day. Today, fifteen rockets were fired at Israel. We have seen attempts to penetrate into Israel. It's an active front.

What is Israel doing? I think what they are doing now is they're trying to get the forces ready for an eventual major advance into the Gaza Strip. They have to decide how to do it and when to do it, but in my opinion there is no hurry. We better prepare the ground and the air force is doing it. The Air Force is doing it so let them do their job. When you enter you have to minimize the capability of Hamas to resist.

About the hostages: nobody knows the total number, including Israel. I think even Hamas doesn't know. They have threatened to execute hostages in return for Israeli bombing. Today I was carefully checking on the air force's continued raids on Hamas targets in Gaza and other places. I didn't hear anything else coming from Hamas about executing hostages but it's a real serious possibility.

I would end by saying that we have entered this confrontation in a situation where we had a government and mainly a prime minister who is discredited, who's not trusted by, I would say, more than half the population. And now four days after this horrible massacre, he still can't make up his mind about forming an emergency war cabinet with the opposition because some hooligan like Mr. Ben Gvir, whom he appointed as minister of National Security, wants to be in that cabinet, and the opposition leaders, rightly so, say no, we don't need this guy. So it's been four days and we don't have a war cabinet that is a signal of unity, of concentrated national effort, and people are wondering.

I'll finish by saying one thing: what I saw in my family and many others was that many international air flights to Israel are canceled, but you should have seen the flight coming in from Bangkok last night. It was all, not just my young nephews, it was all young Israelis coming to their reserve units, going up north and going down south. If Hamas is counting on the division within Israel and the political turmoil that Bibi Netanyahu has created I think they are going to be proven wrong.

MATTHEW LEVITT: People need to understand the nature of Hamas and the nature of its terrorist infrastructure and capabilities. I think there's a disconnect because many people seem to have gotten to the point, certainly in the years since 2007 when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by force of arms, pointing its weapons and shooting its weapons at fellow Palestinians, that Hamas had somehow changed; that it was no longer a group committed to violent jihad; that it was somehow more representative of Palestinians in general, that it was about the continued siege of Gaza and occupation and, as it likes to say whenever it gets a chance, defending Jerusalem. In fact, this series of terrorist attacks was named the Al-Aqsa Flood. Certainly that's its propaganda.

In fact, in the years since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, it found itself in a position to do things it never before thought that it could. Limited until then with suicide bombings and shooting attacks targeting buses or cafes, the types of things that are really only still possible in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip Hamas realized that if it played a long game it could build up an infrastructure the likes of which most terrorist groups don't get to build. This comes by controlling space, having an effective safe haven, being able to build up a storage of small arms and a collection of, in the early days, imported and, in the years since, domestically produced rockets and projectiles that can go various lengths, some of them quite far into the North, the West Bank, and, certainly as we've seen today, Tel Aviv. Hamas was also able to build up a cadre of fighters that they could use in large numbers at a future date.

The many people who thought that Hamas would be co-opted by governance, that it would be too busy collecting garbage and paying the salaries of school teachers to be fully committed to fighting Israel in a large-scale war, who thought that Hamas would be deterred because there would likely be a significant Israeli retaliation, have been proven wrong in a very painful and bloody way.

So today we need to look at Hamas as a militant and terrorist group, not only as one that can carry out your standard terrorist attacks, but as one that could successfully deploy at least a thousand people into Israel in coordinated attacks. An organization that successfully led a disinformation campaign convincing Israel not only that it could be deterred and that as long as money came in

and there were jobs – just last week Israel allowed an additional number of workers to come into Israel from the Gaza Strip – that things could be calm. Having riots at the fence and using those as cover, shootings in the West Bank, and making people think that was the totality of what it was going to do.

I think it's important to remember that Hamas is not about occupation. It's not about the lack of a two-state solution – Hamas opposes a two-state solution – Hamas is about creating an Islamist state in all of historic Palestine, including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and all of Israel. It's about the destruction of Israel and that's something I think a lot of people have lost sight of.

The Israeli Air Force, as Ehud said, is going to be focused right now on trying to destroy as much of their military capability as possible. That will, of course, involve those that are shooting rockets but also Hamas defensive capabilities, and here I think it's important to remember the Hamas tunnel system, not the one that was built into Egypt for smuggling and not the one that was dug into Israel before an underground fence prevented Hamas from planning an earlier version of this week's attacks, I'm talking about the tunnels domestically within the Gaza Strip that Hamas built specifically so that when the day came that they were able to draw Israel into a ground fight in the Gaza Strip they would be able to pop up from places unannounced and ambush soldiers.

There's also the American angle here, and Rob mentioned this briefly. This is in fact the most serious attack targeting Americans abroad since 9/11 and we don't have the full numbers. The White House said we know of 11 Americans killed. The likelihood that that number increases is painfully high, and we don't know the number, but we do know that there were Americans who were kidnapped into the Gaza Strip.

The FBI will be opening up cases through their extra-territorial squad for every American who was a victim of this series of attacks, whether people were killed, injured, terrified, escaped, or, of course, kidnapped. The United States will be providing intelligence support to the Israelis, though I imagine that that will be the limit on this issue because the Israelis know what they're doing and will not need more U.S. support. Israel is famous for saying that they're not going to ask someone else to fight for them but because there are Americans that are held hostage you can imagine that the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement communities are going to be looking at this very closely.

They will be looking at things domestically too, not that I think that there's any type of Hamas threat in this country in a militant sense, but you don't need to look far on social media already to see very violent and hateful rallies that not only include potential hate crimes but violence in cities across the United States. That is going to take the attention of law enforcement as well.

We're going to have opportunities later this week to talk more broadly about the likelihood of horizontal escalation, whether it's from Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hezbollah and other Shia militants from Syria, or the potential for Houthi missiles to be launched at Eilat from the south. But I think it's important here to underscore something Ehud said: I think it's unlikely that Hamas decided to take these series of actions knowing that the Israelis would have to retaliate in a very significant way without the belief that, if push came to shove, other elements of what we call the Iran threat

network and what they call the Axis of Resistance would come to their defense and create other fronts in this war.

Whether or not that happens remains to be seen. The West Bank is fairly quiet right now. East Jerusalem is fairly quiet right now. There's been stuff happening on the northern border but frankly, less than many of us might have expected. But opening more fronts against Israel certainly is Hamas's hope.

Finally, I think we need to recognize that this does change everything. Anybody who expects that the response to an attack like this is going to be like previous responses deeply misunderstands the nature of this attack and the nature of its psychological impact on Israel. Yes, Israel will have to reassert deterrence and Israel will have to convince its own population and others of its capabilities. But it's much more than that. At the end of the day when we come out of the tunnel of the immediate threat that we are in right now, there might be some opportunities. I think that if I were sitting in Riyadh or if I were sitting in Abu Dhabi or if I were sitting in Jerusalem one of my big takeaways now, and I think it will still be the case in several weeks, is that the regional moderates really do have a lot to be afraid of from Iran and its proxies. Their interest in joining forces for a lot of positive reasons having nothing to do with Iran but also because of a desire to share in intelligence, information, technology, counter-drone technology, and more is very real. I think that in the long run Iran and Hezbollah and most certainly Hamas have only driven that home.

NEOMI NEUMANN: I agree with my colleagues that this attack of Hamas was totally a surprise for Israel. In all the ways that you look at it, actually, Hamas has changed the rules and now Israel needs to change the paradigm regarding Hamas, regarding the Gaza Strip, but maybe, also, regarding the whole Palestinian Arena and the way that the Middle East is supposed to be.

The aim is now to topple the Hamas regime. This means that it will take a long time, tremendous effort, and a lot of Israeli casualties. It won't be easy. I think that the real thing now is that Israel, the United States, and international parties need to sit together right now and think about what should we do the day after Hamas is eliminated. How can we design or redesign the shape of the Middle East and the Palestinian arena to avoid another event like this?

This is not only war between Israel and Hamas -- it's much bigger than that -- and I am talking about Iran and Hezbollah. Hamas got inspiration, support, funds, means, and know-how from Iran. This has allowed it to develop tremendous military capabilities, and to demonstrate them during the last four days. Furthermore, Iran was and remains a multi-dimension threat that not only focuses on the nuclear area but also on terror and subversion.

I think also Israel needs to focus on how we can strengthen the Palestinian Authority, whether to avoid the collapse of the Palestinian Authority but also to create a platform so that in the future the Palestinian Authority will be able to go back to the Gaza Strip and take control.

Now to the question: How did we get to this terrible war that started only four days ago and probably will last for a long time.

We actually were familiar with Hamas's strategy. Hamas has always talked about the great campaign, the military campaign, that would lead to the destruction or defeat of Israel. We also speculated that this would be a multi-dimension campaign, which means through the air, through the land, through the sea. It will also include rocket attacks and kidnapping.

According to Hamas, the whole campaign was actually prepared to create the conditions to establish an Islamic State between the river and the sea, led by Hamas.

Over the years, there was kind of wishful thinking in Israel that maybe since Hamas became sovereign in the Gaza Strip it would gradually become more moderate and focus on civil affairs rather than its obligation to the "resistance" or to the military.

I must say that from time to time we had to face the fact that Hamas was still totally obligated to its goals as a terror organization and not to civil affairs. Hamas actually took over the Gaza Strip in 2007 not by election, not by reconciliation, but by terror. Furthermore, every time that Hamas was asked to choose between military buildup and civilian welfare, it always chose the military.

Israel didn't find any solution to deal with Gaza except to impose a blockade. But this solution didn't yield any real results. More than this: It actually jeopardized Israel because Israel feared a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority didn't want to go back into the Gaza Strip -- of course not with the assistance of Israel -- and Israel didn't want to conquer Gaza again.

Because there was no proper solution, Israel and Hamas managed to create a kind of modus vivendi, a partial and temporary coexistence. Hamas and Israel actually played a kind of game: Israel accepted the sovereignty of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Israel bought from Hamas a period of relative quiet.

In return, Israel helped Hamas by easing the blockade mainly after a military operation or after the return campaign during 2018-2019. When Hamas directed people to the border fence, they acted violently. Now Hamas, the whole time, continues to put efforts to build up its military forces and it focused not only on developing military capabilities in the Gaza Strip but also in other arenas like the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Israel actually reduced the scope of the blockade and let Hamas upgrade its capability in the Gaza Strip. But Hamas managed to find another formula: "We will keep quiet on the Gaza Strip but in the meantime, we will send our arms to the other areas: The West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and even to East Jerusalem and Israeli Arabs."

We asked ourselves from time to time whether we saw any sign that Hamas had become moderate. Two decades after Hamas took control over the Gaza Strip we did not find any. Hamas stuck to its vision and its goal. We could see that it was pragmatic but not moderate.

For example, when even the Palestinian authority suggested that Hamas join the PLO and accept the Quartet on the Middle East provision recognizing Israel, Hamas rejected it. In 2017, Hamas

leader Yahya Sinwar lectured Palestinian students saying we will never accept Israel's existence. We will continue to build up our military forces. Hamas also took advantage of Israel helping Palestinian society. When Israel enabled clothing factories to be built that were supposed to improve the lives of the Gazans. Hamas took advantage to infiltrate arms to the West Bank. When Israel let them have medical treatment in Israel, the opportunities were exploited to deliver messages to promote terror attacks.

Let me address the connection between Hamas and the so-called "Resistance Camp" by which I mean Iran and Hezbollah. I think the turning point was in 2021 when Yahya Sinwar decided to set aside the modus vivendi with Israel to launch rockets at Jerusalem. He managed to surprise Israel and also unify the whole Palestinian arena: The Israeli Arabs, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and East Jerusalem. I think at this point Iran understood that Hamas is an asset that it could take advantage of, and to cooperate with not just as a sponsor but as an ally. Together they would be able to harm Israel from different fronts and weaken Israel. The Iranians reasoned that if Israel is weaker it cannot focus on Iran.

I think that Hamas was training for a long time to undertake this operation. I believe Hamas launched the attack because it had achieved operational readiness and Israel was thought to be vulnerable. There is also the chance that Iran approved the attack to derail the pending Israel-Saudi normalization agreement at a time when Israel is weak.

All these operations indicate that from the beginning Hamas has been a radical movement ruled by extremist, cruel leaders. It has remained true to its original vision to diminish and destroy Israel. We failed by thinking that this radical movement would become moderate if we allowed them to attend to the welfare of their people. This was a mistake that cost a lot. Actually too much.

GHAITH AL-OMARI: If I may, I want to start the way that Ehud started, with a personal note. You know, I say this because over the last couple of days, since Saturday, I've seen a lot on social media and on traditional media attempts to explain and justify what Hamas was doing.

Let's be clear—I know we're going to talk about policy, we need to talk about policy and all of that—but let's be very clear: what happened was terrorism. There is no other way to describe it. What happened, the heinous scenes that we have seen, cannot be justified. Nothing justifies them. We need to have that moral clarity as we approach this issue. Of course, we need to talk about policy issues, the conduct of the Israeli response, etc. But at the foundation of it is an immoral act taken by a terrorist organization intentionally hitting civilians for political gain. This we have to be very clear about.

Now, what I will try to do today is to really talk more about Hamas—what it is, what its objective is, both from this operation and in the bigger picture, and a bit about what they're hoping to do in the West Bank arena, in particular, maybe concluding with a couple of notes for policy recommendations for the administration.

So, what is Hamas? Palestinian society, like every other Arab society, has always had a component that is Islamist, that is a believer in the Muslim Brotherhood approach to Islamism. Yet

traditionally, the Islamists in the Palestinian arena really remained outside the nationalist, “liberation” struggle. They were doing religious work, charity, etc.

This changed in 1987. In 1987, when the first intifada had just started, the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine decided that they needed to create their own organization that would get involved in this dynamic, and so Hamas was created. Hamas is an acronym that stands for the Islamic Resistance Movement. Interestingly, the word Palestine does not appear on it because they always saw themselves as something bigger than simply Palestine.

Initially, in the 1980s, Hamas was really an irritant—I say of course a violent irritant, a bloody irritant—but it was not seen as a strategic threat. This changed with the Oslo Accords. With the Oslo Accords, there was the chance for Hamas to distinguish itself when the PLO (the Palestine Liberation Organization) bought into the idea of diplomacy and a two-state solution. This was the opportunity for Hamas to start distinguishing itself. It came out very strong in opposition to Oslo, in opposition to any kind of accommodation with Israel, and with a renewed commitment to violence and terror.

This played out in much of the 1990s with catastrophic events after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and in Israel, where Hamas engaged in a number of suicide bombings that arguably shaped the trajectory of both Oslo and Israeli politics. But Hamas's real rise to prominence happened in the second intifada. In the second intifada, with the resort to terror and violence as a way of dealing with Israel, no one could compete with Hamas. Terror and violence is what Hamas does and what it does well.

When Fatah, rather—the main secular movement—started adopting some of Hamas's own terror tactics, Hamas's paradigm was validated. Long story short, by 2006 when the Intifada was ending, the Palestinian Authority called for an election and Hamas ran in this election. Hamas was very smart. Realizing that the Palestinian public at that point was still scarred from the violence in the intifada, Hamas did not run on a terror platform, though they never renounced terror. Rather, they used the Palestinian Authority's main vulnerability—corruption, poor governance, etc.—and they won the elections. A year ensued in which there were tensions between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, and Hamas ended up with a civil war. In 2007, Hamas took over Gaza, and ever since Hamas has been the governing authority in Gaza.

Now, that period—and I think my colleagues talked a bit about it—was a very interesting period. Hamas used it for several reasons, for several objectives. Part of the objective which Neomi and Matt mentioned was a terror buildup. But there was also a political objective. Hamas saw the idea of governing territory as a vehicle to legitimize itself in the public, international discourse. Hamas was presenting itself as “Look we're governing, we are moderating, deal with us as a legitimate authority.”

In doing this, they were actually being supported by some of the regional supporters. We talk about Iran as a regional supporter of Hamas and that is true, but Hamas has two other regional supporters who support the whole Muslim Brotherhood approach. These are Qatar and Turkey. They were really pushing the Hamas narrative that Hamas is legitimate, and they've been organizing dialogue

between Hamas and different Western interlocutors. So Hamas was trying to go mainstream, and they used some very clever tactics.

For example, a few years ago, they came up with a new political document that they marketed as a change to their charter—which it was not—which was quite clever. They said we were willing to accept a Palestinian state on the '67 borders, and many in the world focused on that part of their statement, forgetting the second part: "We will never accept Israel." Because the very idea of a two-state solution is anathema to what Hamas stands for.

Now, in its governance in Gaza, though they did get some of these diplomatic and mainstream benefits, they also faced some of the challenges of governance, particularly the exposure of their very nature. You know, they did win the elections in '06, and they did convincingly. Yet in governing Gaza, it was very clear that they were as corrupt as the Palestinian Authority, that they were as intolerant—even more intolerant—of anyone of any kind of dissent. Today, if you look at public opinion polling, Hamas is not governing by any stretch of the imagination for being popular. They are governing by force, oppression, etc. I would recommend a series of short interviews with Gazans, with civilians living in Gaza under Hamas to give you a flavor of what it is like living under Hamas.

Nor was Hamas the only available power in Gaza. They had an interesting love-hate relationship with some other factions, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad being the most obvious. Yet Hamas undoubtedly is the undisputed leader in Gaza and there is no political way to dislodge it in the short term.

Now, let's move to what happened this weekend and why Hamas did what it did. I think my colleagues mentioned some of the kind of big-picture, strategic objectives—derailing the Saudi-Israeli rapprochement, and helping Iran and its axis project its power. But also there were domestic, political objectives for what Hamas did that relate to the Palestinian arena, whether in the West Bank or—I wouldn't call it Palestinian—but within Israel itself.

Let me quickly go to the Israeli part. Hamas did hope, and still hopes -- we're still at the very early days of these events -- that we will have a repeat of what happened a few years ago when there were clashes between Hamas and Israel and we saw intercommunal violence between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. They are hoping for that. They are hoping, frankly, that some of the members of the current Israeli government will feed those flames. I am not an expert on Israeli politics, but know enough to say, though, that we are seeing some very courageous voices coming from Israeli Arabs—particularly current member of the Knesset Mansour Abbas—who are urging toward de-escalation.

But the real focus of Hamas has been on the West Bank, and for the West Bank, they have actually three interconnected objectives. First, they hope that they will use the West Bank as a way of opening another front, meaning using terror attacks. So far, we have seen no successful terror attacks coming from the West Bank. Whether they will succeed or not remains to be seen.

They have also been hoping to mobilize the public to stand up, basically to ignite a third Intifada. In doing this, they had actually an assessment of the situation in the West Bank. They have seen the

weakness and fragility of the Palestinian Authority—and we will get to that in a minute—and they are hoping that the anger that the public has on the one hand towards the Palestinian Authority and on the other hand towards Israel will translate into mass demonstrations.

So far, this has not happened yet. Yes, in the last couple of days, we have seen clashes, we have seen casualties, yet we have not seen that mobilization. I would keep a close eye on what happens this coming Friday. The hours after Friday prayers are often the time of heightened tension. But so far, this is not happening and part of why it's not happening is the Palestinian Authority understands these threats and is deploying, to the extent that it can, security capabilities to prevent wide-scale clashes.

The third point, which really encompasses both, is an attempt to basically lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority is extremely weak today. It's weak for several reasons, I think Neomi mentioned some of the reasons. Israeli policy in recent years has been geared really, in effect, to weaken the Palestinian Authority as it stabilized Hamas. But also it's weak because of its own domestic behavior. Corruption, poor governance, and lack of political openness have created a situation where most Palestinians today, according to polls, look at the Palestinian Authority as a liability, not an asset. For Hamas, this creates an opening to create a vacuum and then to fill the vacuum.

I will conclude with a couple of policy recommendations as it relates to U.S. policy. It is too early in the game to talk about very specific policy recommendations, yet I would keep two things in mind as we in the United States approach, diplomatically speaking, the next few weeks. One, no matter how this war ends—and we don't know how it's going to end—we have to make sure that Hamas does not end up being able to demonstrate any win from its use of terror.

There were instances in the past where previous administrations were willing to consider ceasefires that would have given Hamas certain benefits. I think it is key that we make sure that we do not do this. Part of doing this is to make sure that when the various mediators come in, we open the space to allies in the region who agree with our objectives and do not allow others who are Hamas supporters to come and lead these kinds of diplomatic efforts. Yes, we will have to deal with countries like Qatar and Turkey when it comes to issues like hostages. But at the end of the day, some allies share our view—Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and others—and they should be leading the regional diplomacy. We in the United States should be supporting that. Again, thank you very much and I'm looking forward to the conversation.

ROBERT SATLOFF: We have all seen, regrettably, terrorist attacks before. Lots of innocents die. It's highly unusual to see, as Ehud described, the purposeful bayonetting of babies, or the rape and murder of young girls, in the context of a terrorist attack. What is going on here? What message is trying to be sent by this brutality?

OMARI: To be honest I was not surprised. Hamas, and not only Hamas, I think many in the kind of Muslim Brotherhood movement have tried to distinguish themselves from the Salafi Jihadi, Isis Al-Qaeda types, saying we are not terrorists, we are “freedom fighters.” They have tried to present this kind of image yet if you look at the discourse, at the narrative, at the Arabic messaging that Hamas

has been engaged in since its creation, it is all about killing the Jews. It is all about focusing on this kind of violence this is part of what Hamas stands for. In the past, they have not had the opportunity to do this. Today they have this kind of opportunity. I will have to say I am shocked, I am disgusted, by what I have seen, for example, on the Qatari-sponsored Al Jazeera Arabic language TV channel that was celebrating the “humanity” of the Hamas fighters. There is a narrative that has been pushed by the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Hamas tried to push that narrative. what we saw on Saturday I think exposes the true nature of Hamas. Anyone who has engaged with Hamas in the past knows this. If you look at how Hamas even approached its opponents on the Palestinians side, throwing them from the rooftops, etcetera. So none of this is surprising.

LEVITT: You know Hamas tried to portray this as something literally, to use Hamas leader Ismail Haniya's words, “pious” and “devoted.” Words matter.

When you spend years othering and portraying the people on the other side of the fence as being responsible for every suffering you've ever had and being the epitome of evil, and then you wind people up and you give them weapons of war and you break down a fence and you fling them in a direction, then you are responsible for what happens. This is different from anything we've seen Hamas do before operationally but also in terms of the brutality. It's a different type of brutality to blow up a bus; it involves fewer people. It's a different type of thing. And I think it really does show what Hamas is about, not only in terms of what they train their people to do, what their people have actually done, but the words they use and the radicalization that they use to mobilize people literally to violence.

For all those who have seen Hamas as something somewhat different, maybe a larger group that maybe some of its people engage in violence, this puts all of that to bed in spades.

SATLOFF: Iran's role is a hotly politicized and political topic here in Washington. I'd like to just dig a little deeper among our panelists on this question. *The Wall Street Journal* report asserted that Iran had operational decision-making for what happened this weekend. What is your view of this? How much of this can be substantiated? Would you be surprised if indeed this were substantiated? How do you think this will begin to affect Israeli decision-making as it looks forward beyond the immediate?

LEVITT: There's no way Hamas does this solely on its own. It is a matter of fact, it's literally a public media googleable fact, to see that Hamas and Hezbollah and Iranian Quds Force personnel have been meeting in Beirut and Tehran over the past weeks and months. At least some of these meetings have talked about having an operational joint war room of some sort. I think a lot of people, honestly myself included, saw that, heard that, and put it someplace, because we talk about this stuff all the time. I don't think we're likely to find that there were Quds force people on the ground, that Iranians were deciding, “You three people go in that direction.” Hamas doesn't need that. But the likelihood that Iran and Hezbollah were providing strategic guidance is extremely high.

I want to point out that this series of attacks, this exact series of attacks, comes straight out of the Hezbollah playbook that Israel's Northern Command has been practicing and training to counter

for several years now, whether coming overland, underground, or by air. There were plans by the IDF to counter Hezbollah plots to enter Israeli territory, kill as many people as possible, take over towns and raise the Hezbollah flag for that media moment, capture as many people as possible, and take them back into Lebanon, all while shooting rockets. This is literally out of the Hezbollah playbook.

I think part of the shock is that it happened, but it didn't happen where it was expected to happen. But this has Hezbollah and Iran's fingerprints at a strategic level all over it. We're going to need to wait some time before all of this comes out in detail but I don't think that we are going out on any limb here to say that Hamas was talking and working with others.

NEUMANN: Traditionally there is a tight relationship between Hamas and Iran. They managed to bridge the gap between Shia and Sunni. When Hamas was under blockade, Iran continued to put money, knowledge, and means. There was only one period of time when Hamas leader Khaled Mashal tried to take the movement to another place. But the two main and prominent leaders now, Yahya Sinwar and Salah al-Arouri, are so close to the Iranians. Salah al-Arouri is sitting in Lebanon, meeting regularly with Hezbollah and people from Iran. They are meeting. They are coordinating. They are getting money and knowledge. It would be foolish to look for Persian-speaking agents in Gaza. However, Hamas wouldn't have managed to become so capable militarily if it weren't for Iran. Iran is more than a sponsor; Iran is an ally.

YAARI: I just wanted to say that they knew that they had a commitment from the Iranians. They wouldn't go into this kind of operation any other way. I think at this moment Sinwar is in a bunker under the Shifa Hotel in Gaza. He is sure that if Israeli divisions start getting into Gaza there will be a major response from Hezbollah. That's the only explanation of what has happened.

SATLOFF: I want to clarify a comment that I made earlier. When I referred to one of the unique aspects of what has gone on this weekend I referred to the sort of brutality citing the rape that is part of what is going on. I used the term "sexuality." Of course, this is not sexuality, this is brutality. Rape is a violent act, not an act of sexuality.

Finally, what is the endgame for Gaza? When the dust settles, when the fog clears, is Israel returning to Gaza? Is Israel reabsorbing Gaza? Is Israel handing the keys to an international force as was suggested by *New York Times* columnist Brett Stevens? Is Israel handing it to some local Gaza family who is going to be running whatever passes for an administration?

YAARI: First we do it, then we think.

SATLOFF: Okay first do, then think. Is there anyone who has thought this through yet?

LEVITT: And the answer to that is no. The immediate reaction is a group that did something so horrible has to be removed. It's not clear to me how you literally remove all of Hamas. In recent hours some of the statements I've heard from Israel have changed a little bit. It's no longer destroying Hamas, removing Hamas, it's decapitating their leadership and operational capability. It's very likely that at the end of the day, if Israel can achieve its security goals then and severely cut

Hamas off at the knees and make it so that the group is not capable of doing anything like this, or much less at least for a long period, then they will pull out. There will still be whatever is left of a Hamas leadership there to run the Gaza Strip and then the day after conversation will not be who runs the Gaza Strip but what are the conditions for any type of resumption of aid, etcetera, if, in fact, Hamas continues to rule there. but I don't think the Israelis or anybody else has any interest in going in and trying to rule again.

YAARI: I mean there is no answer to this question, obviously, and this is one of the reasons I would assume Israel has not done it yet in the previous wars. But I would say two things to keep in mind as we think of this. One is, in the end, what's happening in Gaza does not only impact Israel, it has an impact beyond Israel. It impacts Egypt's security. It impacts kind of some of the bigger shifts in the region. The solution, I believe, should be coordinated between Israel and some of these other stakeholders who need to also step in and play their own role. It's not enough for the Arab world to give this only to Qatar.

Two. Ultimately the Palestinian Authority, which would have been the obvious address, cannot do it because of its weakness, its lack of legitimacy, credibility, etcetera. I think a serious effort should be made to rebuild the Palestinian Authority, not through throwing money at it, because we know what's going to happen to this money with all the corruption, but really re-engaging in a clear, strong, directed institution-building project for the Palestinian Authority to enable again to come and fill a vacuum in the West Bank and later on in Gaza.

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