

Failed Concepts Hobble Israel and America

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“It looks like they didn’t hit anything but military targets,” President Joe Biden stated approvingly on Oct. 27, hours after Israeli fighter aircraft flew 1000 miles in an historic operation to strike Iranian air-defense systems, drone and missile production facilities, and launch installations. “I hope that this is the end,” the president added.

Biden’s is a vain hope, since Iran shows no signs of desisting from its multi-front war against the Jewish state. For its part, Israel has begun to reckon with the wishful thinking that left it vulnerable on Oct. 7, 2023, to the thousands of Iran-backed Hamas jihadists who burst across the border at dawn and massacred some 1,200 persons, mostly civilians and including Americans, and kidnapped around 250 persons, mostly civilians and including Americans. However, the wishful thinking that typifies the Biden administration’s approach to Middle East diplomacy gives little evidence of abating.

In late October, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein conducted “talks with Lebanese officials in Beirut on conditions for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah.” Hochstein declared “that the conflict has ‘escalated out of control.’” Yet the Biden diplomat remained unbowed. He endeavored to work with the governments of Lebanon and Israel to find “a formula that brings an end to this conflict once and for all.”

Instead of speaking vaguely of “conditions for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah,” Hochstein should emphasize securing an agreement that enables Israel to achieve its war aim in the north, which is to return to their homes more than 60,000 internally displaced Israelis. Since Oct. 8, 2023, Iran-backed Hezbollah’s daily aerial bombardment has rendered a swath of northern Israel uninhabitable. Hezbollah opened a northern front in support of Hamas, whose Oct. 7 invasion in the south was one phase of the Gazan jihadists’ longstanding war of annihilation against the Jewish state.

Furthermore, the conflict was far from having, as Hochstein put it, “escalated out of control.” To the contrary, in mid-summer Israel went on the offensive with a series of remarkable operations. In cooperation with the nation’s intelligence agencies, the Israel Defense Forces decimated Hezbollah’s leadership starting with Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. In addition, Israel took out of commission thousands of Hezbollah fighters by detonating from a distance their pagers and walkie-talkies. Israel substantially degraded Hezbollah’s enormous rocket and missile caches – by 80%, estimated Defense Minister Yoav Gallant – through targeted airstrikes. And in early October, the IDF launched a limited cross-border ground

operation – opposed by Biden – to eliminate Hezbollah’s stores of weapons housed in villages in southern Lebanon, and to demolish the network of tunnels the Shiite militia built to launch an invasion of Israel and perpetrate their own civilian massacre.

Finally, no “formula” Hochstein could concoct in Beirut could “bring an end to this conflict once and for all.” Hezbollah remains a formidable fighting force: It is battle hardened by military experience gained in defense of dictator Bashar al-Assad in the 13-year Syrian civil war and, even after Israel’s extraordinary achievement in searching out and destroying a large portion of its armaments, Hezbollah still possesses tens of thousands of drones, rockets, and missiles. Moreover, Hezbollah exercises great power within the Lebanese government and civil society. And Hezbollah represents only one of seven fronts – including Hamas in Gaza, Hamas in Judea and Samaria, militias in Syria and Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, and Tehran itself – in Iran’s war on Israel.

Hochstein’s faulty assessment reflects the Biden administration’s bad ideas about Israel’s exercise of its right to self-defense, Iran and its regional proxies, and America’s regional interests. But the Biden administration is hardly alone in its subjection to flawed strategic thinking.

According to Shany Mor, Israeli politics and national-security strategy have been captive to four “larger conceptual frameworks that were vigorously held onto in the years leading up to Oct. 7 and that have not yet been entirely abandoned.” In “The Failed Concepts That Brought Israel to October 7,” Mor shows that responsible postwar policymaking depends on “honest appraisal” of these discredited concepts.

A lecturer in political thought at Reichman University, Mor recognizes that Israel must examine its Oct. 7 intelligence and combat failures – little warning and few troops guarding the Gaza border. That inquiry is “straightforward enough,” he observes. “Tactical lesson-learning is relatively easy because it doesn’t require us to abandon cognitive conceptions that we might have a heavy moral investment in.”

Scrutinizing the bad ideas that prepared or obscured the tactical blunders is more challenging. Because of the “heavy moral investment” that politicians, diplomats, military analysts, and voters sometimes make in basic views and larger frameworks, argues Mor, “[d]islodging them often involves parting from something central to ourselves.” Israel’s failed concepts, furthermore, “didn’t lead to disaster because they were obviously bad, but rather because they seemed to work, or at least presented a reassuring front to those who wanted to believe they were working, for so long.”

The first failed concept is that maintaining the status quo with the Palestinians was possible and necessary. That error will be associated irrevocably with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has headed the government for approximately 14 of the last 16 years. “In 28

of the 30 years leading up to the October 7 war,” moreover, “from the time he took over the Likud in 1993 until Hamas’s rampage, he was always either the opposition leader, the prime minister, or a senior government minister.”

According to Mor, Netanyahu’s “approach to national security has all along been characterized by suspicion and skepticism about Israel’s Arab neighbors and the international community, indecision and deferral on Israeli action, and a mystical belief in the importance of messaging over policy.” The suspicion and skepticism reflect harsh realities, the indecision and deferral proved costly, and the heavy reliance on messaging over policy stands exposed as a disastrous substitute for statesmanship.

Epitomizing Netanyahu’s efforts to indefinitely manage the conflict with the Palestinians – and, in Mor’s estimation, most damaging – were the “suitcases of Qatari cash conveyed into Gaza under his [Netanyahu’s] watchful eye and with his explicit support.” The enormous transfer of wealth – “billions of dollars over roughly a decade,” according to the New York Times – over which Netanyahu presided enabled Hamas to fund its war on the Jewish state. It allowed Qatar, home to America’s largest Middle East military base and a haven for Hamas leadership, to court both the friends and enemies of freedom in the Middle East. It wrongly presupposed that in a crunch America would bring pressure to bear on Turkey and Qatar, both of which harbor Hamas jihadists. And “[t]he stench of shadiness and corruption” surrounding Netanyahu’s policy of propping up Hamas in Gaza “played into the worst beliefs about him among his domestic political opponents while not playing up a single positive image of him among his supporters.”

The second failed concept – driven by the “right-wing religious settler Zionism” that forms a crucial component of Netanyahu’s current coalition – “made settling the West Bank a top religious and national priority.” Approximately 2.75 million Palestinians live in Judea and Samaria. Unrest there last year before the Oct. 7 attacks, stirred up in part by the religious ultra-nationalists, required Israel to shift essential troops from the Gaza border to the West Bank. The religious ultra-nationalists, moreover, tend to ignore or downplay the terrible dilemma posed by their quest to impose Israeli sovereignty over all of Judea and Samaria: Either grant West Bank Palestinians citizenship, which would undermine Israel as a Jewish state, or deny them citizenship, which would subvert Israel as a rights-protecting democracy.

The third failed concept, nurtured by those whom Mor called in a previous article “the peace processors,” is that Hamas’ oft-proclaimed dedication to destroying Israel should not be taken seriously. Notwithstanding abundant evidence, the peace processors – well represented in the Obama and Biden administrations – suppose that they can strike a deal, culminating in the near-term establishment a Palestinian state, by persuading both sides to make painful concessions. If, however, Hamas wanted a state, it could have built one in Gaza, which it has ruled since 2007. Instead, Hamas established an Islamist theocracy, the principal goal of which is to eliminate Israel.

The fourth failed concept holds that international institutions and organizations ameliorate Palestinians' plight and promote Middle East peace. Presenting themselves as the authoritative expression of the moral conscience of the so-called "international community," these institutions and organizations – foremost among them the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (on whose operations in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, Israel recently imposed severe limits) – have poisoned and prolonged the conflict. They promulgate a bizarre notion of refugee status, contrary to international law everywhere else, according to which Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza pass on refugee status to their descendants. Moreover, rather than making Gaza prosperous or resettling its inhabitants elsewhere, UNRWA collaborates with Hamas to nurse Palestinian grievances, sustain Palestinian dependence on foreign aid, perpetuate Palestinian refugee status, encourage Palestinians to yearn to return to, and conquer, Israel, and harbor and equip Palestinian terrorists.

The benefits of Mor's incisive analysis go beyond loosening the grip on Israel of failed concepts. His rethinking of Israeli national security strategy also provides a springboard for reexamining a variety of failed concepts that have enthralled Biden-administration Middle East diplomats.

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