

Israel Thwarts External Threats While Amplifying Internal Ones



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TEL AVIV—In mid-December, the Wall Street Journal featured an upbeat interview with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Jewish state’s remarkable military achievements over the last several months gave Netanyahu much about which to boast. Since summer, Israel has turned around a stalled military campaign, inflicting major damage on the Islamic Republic of Iran and its ring of fire – proxy militias to Israel’s south in the Gaza Strip and Yemen; to the north in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq; and in the east in Judea and Samaria.

But the Journal interview created a misleading picture, leaving blurry the persistent geopolitical menaces and overlooking Israel’s destabilizing internal fissures. The Jewish state still faces an Iran on the threshold of producing nuclear weapons and capable of attacking with thousands of missiles and drones, and jihadists – severely weakened and in disarray though they be – still encircle it. The more formidable threat to Israel’s long-term well-being may well stem from the mutual resentments and acrimony, exacerbated by the prime minister’s rhetoric and domestic policies, that roil this wonderful but troubled nation.

In [“Benjamin Netanyahu: The Inside Story of Israel’s Victory,”](#) Wall Street Journal editorial writer and letters editor Elliot Kaufman reports that Netanyahu views Israel’s military response to Iran-backed Hamas’ Oct. 7 massacre in southern Israel as nothing short of historic. “The campaign that we carried out changed the Middle East,” the prime minister stated.

That campaign, Netanyahu explained, owed much to his rejection of the Biden administration’s preference for aerial attacks against Hamas. Instead, Netanyahu authorized a ground invasion despite the grave difficulties posed by the jihadists’ immoral and lawless transformation of Palestinian noncombatants into human shields by constructing hundreds of miles of tunnels under, and embedding their military operations within, Gaza’s urban areas. “From the air, you can mow the lawn. You can’t pull out the weeds,” Netanyahu told the Journal. “We’re here to uproot Hamas – not to deliver deterrent blows, but to destroy it.”

Netanyahu stressed that he rightly resisted the Biden administration’s pressure to refrain from seizing the Philadelphi corridor along Gaza’s border with Egypt and – under White House threat of suspending access to “critical arms” – from invading Hamas’ southern-Gaza stronghold in Rafah. Seizing the Philadelphi corridor enabled Israel to cut off Hamas’

weapons' smuggling. And invading Rafah – in response to which America paused shipment of heavy bombs to Israel – inflicted a decisive blow against Hamas without causing civilian casualties in numbers remotely resembling the Biden administration's dire forecast.

Netanyahu also emphasized his decision to execute the mid-September exploding-pagers and walkie-talkies operation against Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah. Although "there were those who had misgivings about using it at all," he "pushed it through" because it was "time-sensitive," the prime minister said. Thanks to "the greatest surgical targeting in history," the operation produced "a shock and awe of historic proportions."

Then Netanyahu approved the military's "brilliant" plan to strike Hezbollah's missiles. "In six hours," he stated, "we wiped out most of the ballistic-missile stockpiles Hezbollah had amassed." Shortly thereafter, Netanyahu ordered the killing of Hassan Nasrallah. In the process of destroying Nasrallah's command bunker located several stories underground in a south Beirut neighborhood, the Israeli Air Force took out the Hezbollah leader and several of his top commanders.

In late October, Israel's air force flew more than a thousand miles to strike precisely and blow up most of Iran's air defenses and ballistic-missile production capacities.

Each Israeli success further weakened Iran's Axis of Resistance. "We knocked down Hezbollah, which was supposed to protect Iran," said Netanyahu. "And Iran didn't protect Hezbollah either. And neither of them protected [Syria's Bashar al-] Assad. So, we just split that whole axis right down the middle."

Trump's return to the White House bolsters Netanyahu's optimism. In the Journal interview he expressed the hope that at last a deal could be struck to return the approximately 100 remaining hostages held by Hamas for more than 14 months in nightmare conditions in Gaza. And he anticipated expanding the Abraham Accords by normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia.

Looking back, Netanyahu concluded that he was right, soon after the Oct. 7 massacres, to declare "total victory" as Israel's war aim.

The Journal's heartening account of Netanyahu's war-time leadership and Israel's resilience, courage, and military acumen and might provides a valuable corrective to the frequently one-sided and hostile coverage to which the Jewish state's exercise of its right of self-defense has been subject. But the Journal's portrait of Netanyahu is also incomplete and can lead astray.

The prime minister's insistence on total victory, for example, always has promised too much. Now, as last year, it masks the region's harsh realities and Israel's political turmoil.

The contemporary model for total victory is the 1945 unconditional surrenders that America and the Allied Powers imposed on Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The victors compelled the defeated Axis Powers to disarm and relinquish political power.

Nothing comparable is in the cards in the Middle East. Although Israel has dismantled Hamas' military in Gaza and ended its theocratic rule over the territory, the jihadists continue to operate in Gaza, as in Judea and Samaria, as a terrorist organization. Moreover, despite the Israel Defense Forces' destruction of tens of thousands of Hezbollah rockets and missiles, Hezbollah arsenals still contain tens of thousands. Rebels in Syria replaced the Iranian-backed Assad regime with a Turkey-backed Sunni theocracy. Iran retains enough drones and missiles to cause substantial death and destruction in Israel, and Tehran's setbacks have not prevented it from supplying Yemen's Houthis with drones and missiles capable of terrorizing Israel. And the Muslim Brotherhood, implacably opposed to Israel, enjoys substantial public support in Egypt and Jordan.

Although a delusive military goal, total victory functions as effective political rhetoric to justify the postponement of actions essential to Israel's war efforts and public morale. More than 14 months after it launched ground operations in Gaza and several months after it completed major military operations there, the Netanyahu government has yet to provide a plausible plan for Gaza's reconstruction and post-war governance of the territory's approximately 2.3 million Palestinian residents. Moreover, although the IDF has investigated and released preliminary findings about the military's failure to protect Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, the government has refused to establish a state commission to investigate the government's failures.

The Journal's portrait also veils Netanyahu domestic policies that have widened Israel's social divisions and embittered political camps.

First, Netanyahu gave the green light in early January 2023 to Minister Yariv Levin to launch sweeping judicial reform, which sparked months of massive protests throughout the country. Over the last three decades, not only conservatives but some of Israel's most incisive and independent thinkers – the late Professor Rut Gavison, the late Professor and Knesset Member Amnon Rubenstein, and journalist Ben-Dror Yemini – have argued forcefully for reform of Israel's hyper-activist supreme court. But not Netanyahu – certainly not as prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and from 2009 to 2021. This lends credence to the opposition's accusation that Levin's drastic judicial overhaul would subject the supreme court to the governing coalition's control. This would enable Netanyahu's government to derail – or nullify adverse results of – the long-running criminal proceedings against the prime minister for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust.

Second, Netanyahu has stood by as Treasury Minister and Minister in the Defense Ministry Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir have encouraged Israeli settlement-building in areas of Judea and Samaria with substantial Palestinian populations.

These new settlements magnify the difficulty of separating Israel from the approximately 3 million non-citizen Palestinians living in the West Bank over whom Israeli exercises military rule. Netanyahu's current settlement policy is a far cry from the West Bank Palestinian economic development he pursued in the years immediately following his 2009 return to the prime ministership. It also impedes normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia. The more Israel intermingles Israeli and Palestinian populations in Judea and Samaria, the more difficult it will be for this or any Israeli government to assure Riyadh that it will cooperate in clearing a pathway to – however far into the future – some form of Palestinian statehood.

Third, during a war that has imposed prodigious demands on Israel's citizen military, Netanyahu's government has pushed divisive legislation to formally exempt the ultra-Orthodox – around 13.5 percent of Israel's population and growing rapidly – from sharing the national responsibility of military service. In early November, Netanyahu fired Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for opposing the ultra-Orthodox exemption. Yet Netanyahu knows as well as anyone that Israel's prosperity depends on fostering greater integration of the ultra-Orthodox into national life. During his 2003-2005 tenure as finance minister, he ended state subsidies designed to encourage ultra-Orthodox families to give birth to exceptionally large numbers of children, well beyond their means to support them. This makes the prime minister's current pandering to the ultra-Orthodox best explicable as an effort to maintain their membership in his coalition.

To preserve and augment Israel's remarkable military achievements, Netanyahu must find ways to reduce the fury, despair, and enmity among citizens inflamed by his domestic policies.

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