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From Oslo to Be'eri: how the 30-years-long peace delusion led to Hamas's 10/7 massacres

Efraim Karsh

School of Humanities, King's College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The failure to prevent Hamas's slaughter of some 1,300 Israelis on 7 October 2023 – the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust – is a direct result of an emergency phone consultation three hours before the terror group's invasion of Israel with the participation of the IDF's and Shin Bet's top leaders, who decided to do nothing despite acute warning signals and failed to alert the Gaza division commander and the political echelon to the imminent attack. Had they taken the minimal precautionary measures, the catastrophe would have been averted altogether. To fully understand the mindset underlying this monumental blunder requires tracing its evolution within the context of the 30-years-long Oslo peace delusion in general, and during the turbulent year preceding the 10/7 massacres in particular. That is: the substitution of a grand strategic deception aimed at Israel's destruction for a true peace process and the attendant emasculation of the IDF's military capabilities and combative/offensive ethos, on the one hand, and the unravelling of Israel's sociopolitical fabric that culminated in the 2023 mass civil disobedience that enticed Hamas into action, on the other. Even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposed the Oslo process from the outset and managed to neutralise its most catastrophic potential calamity – the establishment of a Palestinian state committed to Israel's destruction in the West Bank and Gaza – failed to extricate Israel from this disastrous course and was ironically forced to bear its full brunt on 7 October 2023.

KEYWORDS Hamas; Israel; IDF; 10/7; October 7 massacres; PLO; Benjamin Netanyahu; Ehud Barak; Herzy Halevy; Oslo process; terrorism

On 11 October 1947, fresh from a pan-Arab summit in the Lebanese town of Aley, Arab League Secretary-General Abdul Rahman Azzam threatened that a UN decision to establish a Jewish state would trigger 'a war of extermination and momentous massacre that will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacre or the Crusader wars'.¹ This threat failed to materialise as the nascent State of Israel defeated the all-Arab attempt to destroy it at birth.

CONTACT Efraim Karsh  efraim.karsh@kcl.ac.uk  School of Humanities, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK

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But precisely 76 years later – on 7 October 2023 – thousands of Hamas terrorists burst out of the Gaza Strip and embarked on a genocidal spree of slaughter, torture, rapes, mutilations, pillage, and abductions that would not have shamed Genghis Khan's Mongolian hordes. By the time the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had killed or captured most of the invading terrorists after a few days of hand-to-hand fighting, some 1,300 Israelis had been murdered in the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust,² and the deadliest and most gruesome terrorist atrocity of modern times – fourteen times the 9/11 death toll in the US in relative terms.

How did this come to pass? How could Israel fall for the same Arab ruse of using a Jewish holy day for an all-out assault – and on the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur surprise attack of all dates? How could Israel's world-famous intelligence services fail to detect an operation of this magnitude that had been in preparation for years? Where was the formidable IDF during this fateful day? On 6 October 1973, Israeli aircraft were bombing the invading Egyptian forces along the Suez Canal – hundreds of miles from Israel's airbases – within an hour from the surprise attack. During the 10/7 invasion, not a single aircraft was to be seen for hours, though the attack took place a stone's throw from some airbases; only a couple of attack helicopters desperately tried to stem the terrorist flood.

The eminent British historian AJP Taylor quipped, 'Wars are much like road accidents. They have a general cause and particular causes at the same time'.³ As far as the 10/7 catastrophe is concerned, the particular cause is clear and unequivocal: an emergency phone consultation on October 7, 4 am – two-and-a-half hours before the invasion – with the participation of IDF chief-of-staff Herzl Halevy, Southern Front commander Yaron Finkelman, and Head of Operations Oded Basiuk, as well as Internal Security Agency (Shin Bet) chief Ronen Bar.

Discussing a string of acute last-minute indicators of Hamas's imminent invasion – notably the simultaneous turning-on of numerous Israeli cellphone sim cards by Hamas terrorists in Gaza and the move of the organisation's leadership to underground bunkers – the consultation ended with a decision to further explore the matter in the morning. No one was alerted to the imminent danger: not the Gaza division commander, not the air force commander (with Halevy reportedly rejecting Finkelman's request to move attack helicopters to the southern front), let alone Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant or PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Not only was the Gaza division not placed on an early morning alert – a standard operation procedure – but an hour before the invasion, soldiers of the Golani infantry brigade were instructed not to approach the border fence before 9 am. The only minor precautionary measure taken was to send a small Shin Bet counterterrorism squad to southern Israel.⁴

Glaringly absent from the consultation was IDF intelligence chief Aharon Haliva. On a family vacation in the Red Sea resort town of Eilat, Haliva was

awoken on 3 am by his assistant and informed of the exceptional accumulation of indicators of an imminent Hamas attack, only to dismiss them out of hand and resume his sleep.⁵ Why Chief-of-staff Halevy did not insist on the participation of his top intelligence advisor in the consultation remains a mystery. Perhaps he knew this would make little difference given the monolithic mindset of the IDF's general staff; perhaps he didn't trust Haliva's judgement given their long history of 'bad blood'⁶; perhaps Haliva turned off his phone (as was suggested by one source) so as to prevent further intrusion on his vacation. As he was to justify his mind-boggling absence:

My participation in the consultation with the chief-of-staff would have made no difference: I would have said that it was most probably an exercise, that the [alarming] signs were weak, and that we should wait for the morning. It would not have made the slightest change to the final outcome.⁷

Perhaps so. Yet this can hardly absolve the head of the very intelligence service tasked with Israel's national security assessment from participating in such a life-and-death consultation, not least since he had been aware of Hamas's invasion plan for over a year and since the adoption of the minimal self-evident precautions could have easily averted the catastrophe altogether. In the words of former prime minister and IDF chief-of-staff Ehud Barak:

We are not talking about something endemic that cannot be handled but about negligence by the person in charge, who failed to tend to a matter under his responsibility. For, had they decided on 0430 am, after finishing their consultation, that they had nothing to lose – after all, it is the army that can order an immediate state of alert: all tank crews ready for action in their tanks; every soldier in his post; all civilian 'alert squads' [in border localities] on their feet; motorized or helicopter-borne local forces up and ready; about half-a-dozen armed, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) patrolling the border fence alongside four attack helicopters. Had all these measures been taken, the entire event would have turned into a monumental failure for Hamas.⁸

How can this be? How could Israel's top security echelons so callously betray the country's border communities and the soldiers tasked with their protection, many of whom were slaughtered in their beds? How could they fail to alert their political superiors to a clear and present danger of the largest national magnitude in what effectively amounted to a coup d'état that endangered Israel's democratic system and national security?

To fully understand the mindset underlying this monumental dereliction of duty requires tracing its evolution within the context of the 30-years-long Oslo peace delusion in general, and during the turbulent year preceding the 10/7 massacres in particular. That is: the substitution of a grand strategic deception aimed at Israel's destruction for a true peace process, and the adamant refusal to accept this reality against all available evidence. Upheld by substantial parts of Israel's

political and security establishments to this very day, this blunder has caused Israel untold damage in numerous fields, worsening its security position, deepening its internal cleavages, destabilising its political system, and weakening its international standing as illustrated most recently by the International Court of Justice's ruling that Israel's 'continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful' and should be ended 'as rapidly as possible'.⁹

Of these many ravages, a number of developments were particularly instrumental in producing the mindset that culminated in the catastrophic 10/7 consultation:

- Acquiescence in the transformation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip into ineradicable terrorist entities that rained thousands of rockets and missiles on Israel's population centres and murdered some 2,000 Israelis in sustained terror attacks, including a four-year fully-fledged war of terror (euphemised as 'al-Aqsa Intifada'), before culminating in the 10/7 massacres. Absent this wilful blindness, this catastrophe would have never happened.
- Emasculation of the IDF's order of battle and replacement of its combative/offensive ethos with a reactive timid approach that substituted containment for the traditional striving for victory and systematically ignored and/or downplayed the threats confronting Israel – all the way to the October 7 fateful consultation – so as to avoid the need for preventive/pre-emptive measures.
- Exacerbation of the decades-long refusal of the leftwing elites – political, legal, media, academic, and security – to accept their intractable loss of national dominance, and their steadily escalating open defiance of the legitimacy of Likud-led rightwing governments. This culminated in 2023 in a tidal wave of civil disobedience among Israeli Jews, sparked by a massive incitement campaign about the government's supposed intention to transform Israel into a dictatorship, which threatened to undermine the IDF's operational capabilities and tear Israel's socio-political fabric apart. This helped convince Hamas that the moment was ripe for the execution of its long-planned 'Operation al-Aqsa Flood'.

Even Netanyahu, who opposed the Oslo process from the outset and managed to neutralise its most catastrophic potential calamity – the establishment of a Palestinian state committed to Israel's destruction in the West Bank and Gaza – failed to extricate Israel from this disastrous course and was ironically forced to bear its full brunt on 7 October 2023.

A lethal delusion

The 'Trojan horse'

Euphorically launched on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993, the Oslo 'peace process' was predicated on the delusion that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had been transformed from a genocidal terrorist organisation bent on Israel's destruction into a true peace partner ready to eschew its decades-long violence in favour of peaceful coexistence. As Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres repeatedly justified their decision to embark on a process that introduced thousands of (hopefully reformed) terrorists into the West Bank and Gaza, 'one makes peace with enemies, not with friends'.

The problem with this reasoning is that peace is made with enemies who have been either comprehensively routed (e.g. post-WWII Germany and Japan) or disillusioned with the use of violence: not with those who remain wedded to conflict and war. And unlike President Anwar Sadat who truly sought to extricate Egypt from its futile conflict with Israel, the PLO leadership viewed the Oslo process not as a springboard to peace but, in the words of a prominent PLO official, as a Trojan Horse designed to promote the organisation's strategic goal of 'Palestine from the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea' – that is, a Palestine in place of Israel.¹⁰

Yasser Arafat admitted as much even before the White House ceremony when he told an Israeli journalist, 'In the future, Israel and Palestine will be one unified state in which Israelis and Palestinians will live together'¹¹ – in other words, Israel will have ceased to exist. And even as he shook Rabin's hand on the White House lawn, the PLO chairman was assuring the Palestinians in a pre-recorded Arabic-language message broadcast by Jordanian TV that the agreement was merely an implementation of the organisation's 'phased strategy' of June 1974. This stipulated that the Palestinians should seize whatever territory Israel was prepared or compelled to cede and use it as a springboard for further territorial expansion until achieving the 'complete liberation of Palestine' (i.e. Israel's destruction).¹²

In the next eleven years until his death (on 11 November 2004), Arafat was to play an intricate game of Jekyll-and-Hyde politics, extolling the 'peace of the brave' he had signed with 'my partner Yitzhak Rabin' whenever addressing Israeli or Western audiences while simultaneously telling his Palestinian subjects that the Oslo accords were transient arrangements designed to pave the road to Israel's destruction. He failed to abolish the numerous clauses in the Palestinian covenant calling for Israel's demise as he had promised Rabin, indoctrinated his Palestinian subjects with hatred of Israelis and Jews on a scope and intensity unparalleled since Nazi Germany, and refused to disarm the terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad as required by the Oslo accords.

This policy has been sustained by Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas – an unapologetic Holocaust denier and prolific purveyor of anti-Semitic calumnies, who has never eschewed his commitment to Israel's destruction. Small wonder that Abbas and his PLO henchmen failed to condemn the 10/7 massacres with some of them going as far as to flaunt the PLO's participation in the atrocity and to wish for its recurrence in the West Bank. So too did the PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), inter alia, instruct mosque preachers under its jurisdiction to include in their Friday sermons a notorious hadith (contained in Hamas's covenant) urging the total extermination of the Jews, as well as wage a sustained international campaign to stigmatise Israel's counterterrorism operations as a genocide and have its political and military leaders indicted as war criminals.¹³

Nor did the PLO content itself with disparaging the Oslo accords and its Israeli 'peace partner'. Embracing violence as the defining characteristic of his rule, Arafat transformed the West Bank and Gaza into inveterate terrorist entities in line with his perennial ambition to make these territories springboards for 'a popular armed revolution' that would 'force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel'.¹⁴ In the two-and-a-half years between the White House ceremony and the fall of the Labour government in May 1996, 210 Israelis were murdered – nearly three times the average annual death toll of the previous 26 years. By the time of Arafat's death, the terror war he launched in September 2000 had exacted 1,028 Israeli lives in 5,760 attacks: nine times the average death toll of the pre-Oslo era. Of these, about 450 people (or 43.8% of victims) were killed in suicide bombings – a practically unheard of tactic in the Palestinian-Israeli context prior to Oslo. All in all, over 1,700 Israelis were murdered and another 10,000 wounded in the 30 years attending the launch of the Oslo process – four times the average pre-Oslo death toll.¹⁵ Then came the 10/7 massacres and nearly doubled this human cost in one fell swoop.

Eyes wide shut

The PLO's ability to pursue its strategic deception with impunity was enabled by the growing fatigue of Israeli society and its yearning for normalcy that would allow it to enjoy its newly gained affluence. Even Rabin, widely known as 'Mr. Security', was driven to the Oslo process by the fear that Israeli society had lost the stomach for a protracted conflict¹⁶: hence his readiness to surrender the Golan Heights to Syria in contravention of his longstanding position and electoral pledges; hence the rushed cabinet approval of the provisional agreement negotiated in Oslo without any discussion of its full essence and implications,¹⁷ and hence the stubborn disregard of the PLO's countless violations of the Oslo accords. 'We had books and books filled with violations', an Israeli Oslo negotiator told an American journalist. 'I saw

Rabin and Peres so angry at what they had to eat from the Palestinians. But, had they talked back publicly, everyone in Israel would have said, “You chose them. You’re saying that they violated all the agreements, that they can’t be trusted. OK. You made the mistake; so admit that something must be done”.¹⁸

Chillingly euphemising the hundreds of murdered Israelis as ‘the victims of peace’, Rabin made his displeasure with Palestinian terrorism repeatedly known yet failed to take the necessary measures to stop its steady rise. Instead, he developed the oddest excuses to justify his inaction, including the oxymoronic thesis of ensuring Palestinian compliance through non-compliance. That is: rather than demand the PLO’s strict adherence to the accords, let alone publicly fault Arafat for this non-compliance, Israel should seek to boost Arafat’s position through accommodation (e.g. releasing larger numbers of imprisoned terrorists) since ‘there is no other partner ready to make peace’. When Oslo critics warned of the process’s catastrophic implications, Rabin derided them as ‘peace cowards’ who were ‘scared to death of peace’. ‘Likud’s horror stories are well known’, he scoffed. ‘They promised us Katyushas [i.e. rocket attacks] from Gaza. For a year now, the Gaza Strip has been largely under PA rule. There was not a single Katyusha [attack] and there will be no Katyushas’. He even went so far as to disparage Netanyahu as a ‘ Hamas collaborator ’ and his Likud party as ‘the best collaborator that Hamas could hope for’.¹⁹

If this was the position of the sceptical ‘Mr. Security’, small wonder that Peres, who had nudged Rabin into the process in the first place, viewed Oslo not only as the end of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but as a the harbinger of a ‘New Middle East’ that would serve as ‘a spiritual and cultural focal point for the entire world’.²⁰ Hence, Peres went out of his way to deny, dilute, and whitewash the endless Palestinian violations of the Oslo accords, or indeed – anything that smacked of the PLO’s continued commitment to Israel’s destruction. He ignored the organisation’s failure to abolish the clauses in the Palestinian covenant calling for Israel’s destruction, as required by the Oslo accords, and dismissed its adamant insistence on ‘the right of return’ – the standard Palestinian/Arab euphemism for Israel’s destruction through demographic submersion – as ‘an Arab dream that is bound to remain a dream’.²¹ When Arafat told South African Muslim leaders that the Oslo accords were a ploy designed to bring about Israel’s eventual demise and urged them to help spark a pan-Muslim jihad against Israel, Peres excused the comments as a reflection of Arafat’s tortuous adjustment to the new reality. ‘I think what is really important for a peace process is the creation of a partner, more than a plan’, he argued. ‘Because plans don’t create partners, but if you have a partner, then you negotiate a plan’. But what if the partner does not act out the role ascribed to him? ‘We close our eyes. We don’t criticise because for peace, we must produce a partner’.²²

Indeed, even when Arafat launched his fully fledged war of terror in September 2000, two months after being offered an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital by then-PM Ehud Barak at the Camp David summit, Israel was reluctant to shed this façade. Not only did the Barak government not attempt to destroy the PLO's terrorist infrastructure – at a horrendous human cost to Israel – but in the follow-up Taba summit (21–27 January 2001), according to PLO sources, it 'moved considerably beyond the positions presented at Camp David as "red lines" beyond which [Israel] could not go "without jeopardizing the state"²³ – only to be rebuffed yet again.

The 'Osloization' of Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert

While Barak's latest defeatism led within a fortnight to his electoral rout to Ariel Sharon, the new prime minister, despite his reputation as Israel's toughest military leader, sustained his discredited predecessor's defensive strategy in the face of spiralling suicide bombings on Israel's streets and buses. This was manifested not only in the military sphere, where it took Sharon more than a year to embark on a sustained four-year campaign, beginning with Operation Defensive Shield (March 29–10 May 2002), to eradicate the West Bank's – but not Gaza's – terrorist infrastructure, but also in his unexpected conversion to the Oslo delusion. With Peres serving as his foreign minister, as early as October 2001, Sharon broke with Likud's ideological precept by accepting the two-state solution – Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza – provided the newly established state would be demilitarised, as if Arafat had not made mockery of the PLO's contractual obligations in this respect.²⁴ In doing so, Sharon went much further than Rabin, who envisaged 'an entity short of a state that will independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its control' within narrower boundaries than the pre-1967 lines.²⁵

When in May 2002 Finance Minister Netanyahu orchestrated a Likud resolution that 'there will be no Palestinian state west of the [Jordan] River', Sharon said he respected his party's democratic decision yet vowed 'to continue to lead the State of Israel and the People of Israel in accordance with the principles that have always guided me'.²⁶ Indeed, a month later, he accepted (with several reservations) President Bush's proposal for graduated progression towards Palestinian statehood, as he did when this programme evolved into the so-called road map drafted by the Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN).²⁷ Within this framework, he viewed the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza and the evacuation of the Israeli communities there together with their 8000-strong population as a vital respite until the PLO would 'come back to its senses', abandon its terrorist war (the so-called 'al-Aqsa Intifada'), and return to the negotiating table. 'We have no interest to

control you', he appealed to the Palestinians in his first public announcement of the withdrawal plan on 19 December 2003. 'We would like you to run your own lives in a state of your own – a democratic Palestinian state with territorial integrity and economic rationale in Judea and Samaria that maintains a normal, peaceful, and secure relationship with Israel'.²⁸ He repeated the idea ten months later at a Knesset debate on the disengagement, claiming to have been a proponent of the two-state solution as early as the late 1980s when he (allegedly) tried to persuade Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir of the need for territorial compromise. 'We don't want an indefinite rule over millions of Palestinians who double their numbers every generation', he told the legislators. 'As a quintessential democracy, Israel cannot sustain such a reality over the long term. The disengagement plan will open a door to a new reality'.²⁹ Unable to win over Likud to his policy shift, and confronted with a leadership challenge by Netanyahu who resigned his ministerial post shortly before the actual withdrawal (August–September 2005), in November 2005, Sharon seceded from Likud with a third of the party's MKs and formed the centrist Kadima party.

One can only speculate how far Sharon's Oslo delusion would have progressed had he not suffered a massive stroke in January 2006, amidst the run-up to national elections, and fallen into a years-long coma from which he never recovered. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Sharon's deputy Ehud Olmert, who replaced him upon his incapacitation, claimed that the prime minister was determined to carry out further withdrawals in the West Bank.³⁰ It is clear, however, that Olmert had been instantaneously transformed from one of Likud's most hawkish politicians into a self-styled 'peacemaker'. As he explained: 'We are tired of fighting; we are tired of being courageous; we are tired of winning; we are tired of defeating our enemies. We want to be able to live in an entirely different environment of relations with our neighbors'.³¹

Reverting to standard leftist terminology, during his election campaign, Olmert promised to 'not invest in construction or infrastructure development beyond the Green Line' so as to free up 'billions of shekels for infrastructure development in the Negev, Galilee, and Jerusalem'.³² Once swept to power on the crest of the comatose Sharon's lingering prestige, Olmert embarked on personal negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas that culminated in the November 2007 US-orchestrated Annapolis summit, where he agreed to the creation of a Palestinian state in the entire West Bank and Gaza with Israeli territory swapped for some 6% of the West Bank that would remain under Israeli sovereignty. East Jerusalem was to become the capital of the nascent Palestinian state; the 'Holy Basin' was to be administered by a five-member, international trusteeship comprising Israel, the PA, Jordan, the US, and Saudi Arabia; and NATO forces were to be deployed in the Jordan Valley in lieu of the withdrawn IDF. Israel was to absorb some 15,000–20,000

Palestinian refugees in what, in Olmert's view, would satisfy the decades-long Palestinian demand for a 'right of return'.³³

This was, of course, self-delusion of the utmost magnitude that ran against all available evidence to the contrary. Dating back to the late 1940s, the Arab, then Palestinian, insistence on the 'right of return' was no negotiating ploy or bargaining chip but an epitome of the categorical rejection of Jewish statehood and the standard euphemism for Israel's destruction via demographic subversion. But then, Olmert, like all Oslo proponents, had never really listened to his Palestinian 'peace partners' so as not to shatter his carefully contrived peace delusions. As late as 2021, he claimed that 'Abbas never said no' to the proposed peace deal but rather 'was entirely for it'. 'Mahmoud Abbas is a very qualified gentleman, a decent, peace-loving person', he told an Australian interviewer. 'I like him, I trust him, I would've made peace with him. Unfortunately, it didn't work out for reasons that are beyond my comprehension, sometimes'.³⁴

This fanciful narrative runs counter not only to Abbas's own account of the same event (in 2015, for example, he told an Israel TV channel of his rejection of Olmert's proposals, which in his claim were a far cry from resolving the 'Palestinian refugee problem'),³⁵ but also to his countless statements over the past two decades. These ranged from repeated rejection of Israel's very existence in his annual UN General Assembly addresses, to persistent denial of Jewish peoplehood and refusal to recognise Israel as a Jewish state, to blaming the Jews for their WWII extermination and accusing Israel of perpetrating 50 Holocausts, to vowing to continue Arafat's murderous legacy, and so on and so forth.³⁶ As late as July 2022, at a press conference with US president Joe Biden in Ramallah, Abbas called for the end of Israel's 74-years-long 'occupation of Palestine'.³⁷ In other words, nearly three decades after the onset of the Oslo process, Israel's 'peace partner' will not even accept its right to exist and considers its very creation an 'occupation' of 'Palestinian lands'.

Emasculating the IDF

The 'small, smart army' fantasy

The Oslo peace delusion fell on fertile soil in the IDF. As early as the late 1980s, then-Defence Minister Rabin had been convinced by the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza (*intifada*) of the limits of Israel's military power. Echo-chambering his superior, Chief-of-Staff Dan Shomron proclaimed in January 1989, just over a year after the outbreak of the uprising, 'There is no such thing as eradicating the intifada because, in its essence, it expresses the struggle of nationalism'.³⁸ In other words, six-and-a-half years after destroying the PLO's military infrastructure in Lebanon and expelling it

to Tunis, from where it could hardly perpetrate terrorist attacks, the IDF's commander eschewed the notion of victory, insisting that, rather than defeat the popular uprising, the army could only buy time for the government to find a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This defeatist mindset gained considerable momentum under Ehud Barak, who on 1 April 1991, replaced Shomron as chief-of-staff, with devastating consequences for the IDF's fighting capabilities and combative ethos.

Having appropriated Shomron's concept of a 'small and smart army' to make it the defining feature of his term in office, Barak used the Oslo process as a springboard for realising this idea. As early as September 1993 – a fortnight after the White House festive ceremony – he was reportedly transforming the IDF into 'an army of peace'. The underlying assumption of this sea change was that since security was a corollary of peace rather than the other way around, and since the Soviet Union's collapse deprived the radical Arab states of the ability to make war on Israel, the IDF had to be rebuilt in a way that would first and foremost promote the attainment of peace.³⁹

This rationale led to the steady reduction of the IDF's ground forces in favour of overwhelming reliance on airpower and sophisticated weaponry, viewed as the ultimate barrier to what was perceived as the only remaining existential threat: Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons. Within days of his appointment as chief-of-staff, Barak reportedly claimed that Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War (Jan.-Feb. 1991) had removed the likelihood of war on Israel's eastern front for the next 3–4 years, thus allowing the IDF to undergo a far-reaching process of downsizing and reorganisation.⁴⁰ By the end of his tenure in Jan. 1995, according to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, the IDF's inventory of main battle tanks (MBTs) had dropped from 4,488 to 4,095. Six years later, as Barak ended his year-and-a-half term as prime minister and minister of defence, this order of battle had dropped to 3,900. By the spring of 2013, when he finished a 6-year stint as defence minister under prime ministers Olmert and Netanyahu, the IDF's MBT inventory had plunged to 2,442, of which only 480 were top of the range. This was accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the IDF's fighting formations: from 16 divisions in 1991 (6 regular, 10 reserves) to 12 divisions (6 regular, 6 reserves) in 2013.

Particularly marked was the decrease in the IDF's armoured forces – which had spearheaded the 1956 and 1967 victories and defeated the Egyptian-Syrian 1973 surprise attack – from 12 divisions in 1991 to 7 divisions in 2013.⁴¹ Small wonder that retired prominent commanders protested the marginalisation of the armoured corps and the fielding of the general staff with elite units' officers. 'I have nothing against any specific person in the general staff', said Maj. Gen. (res.) Israel Tal, doyen of the armoured corps and 'father' of the Merkava MBT. 'But I am totally opposed to the process the IDF has been undergoing in the past few years, and

especially now. Not only are the elite units, with all their excellent commanders and soldiers, not a sufficient condition for [winning] war, they are not even a necessary condition. Wars can be won without them'.⁴²

This process continued apace in the 2010s as the threat of a multi-front interstate war seemed to have ebbed still further following the regional turmoil occasioned by the so-called 'Arab Spring'. In late 2011, Defence Minister Barak predicted the fall of Bashar Assad's regime within weeks and the attendant weakening of Iran and Hezbollah's ability to fight Israel. This prediction was echoed by Minister of Strategic Affairs Moshe Yaalon, former IDF chief-of-staff (2002–05) and Barak's successor as minister of defence (2013–16), who years earlier had infamously quipped that rather than seek to frustrate Hezbollah's frantic acquisition of rockets and missiles, Israel should do nothing and allow this massive arsenal 'to rot'.⁴³ Small wonder that while Hezbollah and Hamas's military build-up continued apace, the IDF's armoured corps shrank on Yaalon's watch by another 1,000 tanks, while 2,500 army personnel were dismissed, some 100,000 reservists were released from reserve duty, and compulsory service for men was shortened from 36 to 32 months (with a further reduction to 30 months envisaged in 2020).⁴⁴ Even the 7th armoured brigade – the IDF's most illustrious regular tank force that had participated in all of Israel's wars since 1948 and took the main brunt of the Syrian assault in the 1973 war – was on the brink of closure, only to be saved by a wave of public outrage.⁴⁵ Warned by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yitzhak Brik, a decorated corps commander and the long-time Ombudsman for Soldiers' Complaints, of the perils of this trend, Yaalon retorted that armoured forces were no longer significant in the new battlefield, which was now dominated by high-tech weapons systems such as UAVs and drones.⁴⁶

By the time Hamas carried out its genocidal assault on 7 October 2023, the IDF's order of battle comprised a mere 1,300 tanks (of which only 600 were of the latest Merkava MkIV version) – less than a third its strength at the launch of the Oslo process – grouped into 5 armoured divisions, compared to 12 divisions in 1991. This at a time when Israel was exporting hundreds of self-produced tanks to foreign armies, notably the recently agreed to sale of 200 Merkava MkII/III to Morocco.⁴⁷ As a result, in the ensuing 2023–24 war against Hamas – which was instantaneously joined by Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria – Israel was unable to carry out simultaneous offensive operations on more than one front, confining itself to reactive strikes against Hezbollah and evacuating tens of thousands of Israelis from their homes in the Galilee for fear of an invasion from Lebanon – a strategic setback the like of which did not happen even in the 1948 war.

This operational predicament was compounded by dire ammunitions and weapons shortages attending the Oslo-era steady degeneration of Israel's 'low

tech' military industries. Here, too, Barak played a key role in starting the self-destructive process by persuading Defence Minister Moshe Arens within months of becoming chief-of-staff to buy light ammunition as well as artillery and tank shells in the US rather than in Israel for (supposedly) money-saving considerations.⁴⁸ Gaining momentum during Barak's decade-long presence at the helm of the IDF and the defence ministry, this process led to the closure of ammunition and war materiel production lines that culminated in the alarming shortages of the 2023–24 Gaza war and the crippling dependence on US resupplies. In 2012, Barak went as far as to freeze production of Merkava tanks and the new Merkava-based armoured personnel carrier (called Namer), triggering harsh criticism of the move's adverse military, technological, and economic implications.⁴⁹

Paradoxically, it was not only Israel's low-tech arms production that was undermined by the short sighted preference of foreign acquisitions. As deputy chief-of-staff, Barak led the IDF's opposition to the development of the Lavi fighter, which was designed to boost Israel's self-sufficiency in the vital field of air combat (apart from its anticipated scientific, technological, and economic spinoffs), and was lukewarm to Israel's growing integration in the US administration's 'star war' project. Once at the IDF's helm, he appointed a special committee to examine whether to continue developing the *Hetz*, which was to prove an indispensable component of Israel's anti-ballistic missile defence system and a sought-after weapons system worldwide.⁵⁰ Nor was the *Hetz* the only strategic weapons system whose importance Barak failed to appreciate. As early as 1990, he led the opposition within the IDF to the establishment of a modern submarine fleet that would constitute Israel's long-distance strategic arm – including, reportedly, a nuclear second-strike capability, proposing instead to purchase and refurbish old submarines.⁵¹

Renouncing victory, surrendering territory

Discussing the roots of Israel's successful 1956 Suez War in which it destroyed the Egyptian army in Sinai and conquered the peninsula in 10 days, IDF chief-of-staff Moshe Dayan praised his luck in having to restrain galloping horses rather than prod lazy oxen. Forty years later, most of the IDF's galloping horses had been transformed into lazy oxen by the monumental delusion that the Oslo process had ushered in an era of peace in which Israel no longer faced an existential threat from its Palestinian and Arab neighbours – only a far more manageable threat from 'extremist' terrorist organisations. Consequently, as more combative and free-spirited officers were increasingly blocked mid-stream, and the general staff was filled with docile, mediocre ones, the IDF discarded its perennial striving for a swift victory, or indeed for any victory/military decision, in favour of a

‘mowing the grass’ strategy that sought to contain and wear down these organisations through patient decimation of their capabilities, so as to reach a ‘working arrangement’ with a weakened – but not defeated – enemy that would postpone the next conflagration for as long as possible.⁵² This strategy gained traction not merely because of the belief that these organisations represented deep-rooted nationalist or Islamist ideals that could not be defeated by force of arms (as IDF Spokesperson Hagari was to state in the midst of the 2023–24 war),⁵³ but because ‘the future planning and execution of counterterrorist campaigns will not only need to provide greater security for Israel’s citizens but also to secure the positive direction of the political dialogue’ by producing ‘a conceptual change among enemy decision-makers . . . that will prove to the enemy that its [strategic] concept is no longer efficient’.⁵⁴ In the words of Yaalon, one of the foremost practitioners of this conception:

Israel and the Palestinians are Siamese twins attached by their navels. Israel is the stronger of the two, yet is tied to its weaker twin. The two are in the process of separating. The path to separation is cast like a tunnel. Oslo paved the road to the tunnel and the international community wrapped it in concrete . . . But Arafat is not interested in all of this. Arafat doesn’t want to separate at the end of the tunnel, but to blow it up. This will lead to war, in which our task will be to block Arafat’s attempt to blow up the tunnel and get out of it. Our role in the war will be to force Arafat to return to the tunnel, against his will . . . to abandon the path of violence and return to the political path.⁵⁵

As Arafat failed to live up to this expectation and sustained his war of terror to his dying day, Sharon decided to withdraw all IDF forces and Israeli civilians from Gaza in the hope that the disengagement would convince the world of the end of Israel’s ‘occupation’ – though the strip’s Palestinian population had lived under PA rule since May 1994 – and would give it international legitimacy to sustain its ‘mowing the grass’ strategy in Gaza from afar, through surgical airstrikes and without regular friction on the ground. This turned out to be a pipedream as every strong Israeli response to the steadily intensifying Gaza-originated attacks drew widespread international opprobrium with hordes of hate-filled, violent ‘protestors’ flocking onto the streets of Western cities throughout the world – not to support a fellow democracy fighting a genocidal, jihadist terror organisation on its doorstep but to demonise the Jewish state and to vilify and assault their own Jewish compatriots in the worst anti-Semitic wave since World War II.

Sharon should have known better. Five years earlier, on 24 May 2000, Prime Minister Barak had been driven by the same logic to hurriedly vacate Israel’s self-proclaimed security zone in south Lebanon while leaving behind heavy weapons and military equipment and betraying the South Lebanon Army, which had aided the IDF’s counterterrorist operations for decades and which collapsed upon the withdrawal with thousands of its fighters and their

families seeking asylum in Israel. And while Barak extolled the flight as a glowing success – so much so that two months later, after the collapse of the Camp David summit, he instructed Chief-of-staff Shaul Mofaz to prepare an operational plan for the IDF's withdrawal from most of the West Bank⁵⁶ – the move was seen in the Arab world as the defeat of the mighty IDF by a small but determined guerrilla force and helped spark 'al-Aqsa Intifada'. If Israel could not bear 20–25 fatalities per year in the fight against Hezbollah (less than a tenth of the death toll on its roads),⁵⁷ Arafat reasoned, surely it would not be able to stomach the much heavier death cost attending a protracted all-out Palestinian 'intifada'. In Camp David, Arafat warned his Israeli interlocutors that 'we can see to it that the Hezbollah precedent is replicated in the territories', and the threat was amplified by his top henchmen after the summit's failure. A Palestinian public opinion poll found two-thirds of respondents eager to see their leadership follow in Hezbollah's violent footsteps. Placards in mass demonstrations promised 'Lebanon Today, Palestine Tomorrow'.⁵⁸

Far more alarmingly: rather than 'drain the terrorist swamp' and erode Lebanese domestic support for Hezbollah as Barak predicted,⁵⁹ the flight enabled the Islamist organisation to expand to gargantuan proportions, to consolidate its grip over Lebanon, and to transform South Lebanon into an ineradicable terrorist stronghold designed to serve as a springboard for attacks on Israeli territory, to shelter Hezbollah's burgeoning rocket and missile arsenal, and to exact a high cost from attacking Israeli forces in the event of a general conflagration. Ignoring Barak's stark warnings against any attempt 'to try us once we are inside Israel', with its secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah famously deriding Israel as 'weaker than a spider web', Hezbollah launched sporadic attacks on population centres and military targets in northern Israel at a rate of half-a-dozen per year. These began as early as 7 October 2000, of all dates – a mere four months after the withdrawal – with the abduction of three IDF soldiers on a border patrol (who, it later transpired, were killed in the attack), culminating in the 12 July 2006 abduction of two more soldiers (who, too, were killed in the process) and the killing of another three in a cross-border raid, which sparked the Second Lebanon War (July 12–August 14).

Discarding the ground manoeuvre

During that war, Hezbollah fired some 4,000 rockets and missiles on Israeli towns and villages – the largest attack on the Jewish State's population centres since the 1948 war – killing 45 civilians, inflicting massive destruction and economic damage, and driving tens of thousands to flee their homes to the southern parts of the country. By contrast, the IDF hardly ventured more than a few miles from the border during the 34 days of fighting – in

stark contrast to the 1982 invasion that swiftly swept across this area and reached Beirut within five days. It was only on August 11 – a month after the outbreak of hostilities and a few hours before the passing of Security Council Resolution 1701 ending the war⁶⁰ – that the government authorised a poorly conceived and executed ground manoeuvre that ended inconclusively after three days at the cost of 33 lives of the war's 119 military fatalities. In fact, as early as July 22, IDF head of operations and future chief-of-staff Gadi Eisenkot recommended ending the war within a day or two while Chief-of-staff Dan Halutz thought it should end by the beginning of August.⁶¹ Either way, the ground manoeuvre would not have taken place.⁶²

The significance of this episode cannot be overstated. It amounted to nothing short of the effective renunciation of any land manoeuvre – the IDF's foremost forte that had brought the astounding 1956 and 1967 victories and the impressive 1973 rebound. 'It seems that the political and military echelons "slid" into the ground reluctantly and when they had no other choice', an official commission of enquiry headed by Israeli Supreme Court justice Eliyahu Winograd wrote. 'After all of this, how was it that at the end of the day, when a decision was made after hesitations and delays, the ground maneuver began a few hours before the adoption of the Security Council resolution with Israel's consent? Moreover, why didn't they stop the manoeuvre after the Security Council's adoption of Resolution 1701?'

As a result,

For the first time in Israel's history, a war in which it was involved ended without a clear Israeli victory. A paramilitary organization comprising several thousand fighters successfully resisted for many weeks the strongest army in the Middle East. It is difficult to overstate the far-reaching implications of this outcome in our eyes, as well as in the eyes of our enemies, neighbors, and friends in the region and throughout the world.⁶³

Similarly, it took more than three full years of sustained rocket and missile attacks on Israel's population centres after the Gaza disengagement before the IDF grudgingly launched a large-scale campaign. Yet while the ground manoeuvre in Operation Cast Lead (27 December 2008–21 January 2009), as the campaign was named, was better conceived and executed than its ill-fated Lebanese precursor, within ten days after its launch on January 1, Defence Minister Barak and Chief-of-staff Gabi Ashkenazi (who had been brought from retirement after the Second Lebanon War to rebuild the IDF, especially its ground forces) were reportedly seeking to wind down the operation, which they believed had entered the point of diminishing military returns and was becoming a political liability. They were opposed by Prime Minister Olmert, who, in sharp contrast to his procrastination in the Lebanon war, demanded to continue fighting regardless of human and diplomatic costs (years later

Olmert would claim that he wanted to follow the operation to its natural conclusion and destroy Hamas, only to be obstructed by Barak, Ashkenazi, and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni).⁶⁴

Be that as it may, Operation Cast Lead did not cure the IDF of its aversion to a ground manoeuvre, not least since Israel's much improved anti-rocket/missile capabilities (notably the Iron Dome system) ameliorated potential pressures for a land incursion to neutralise Hamas's rocket/missile threat. Thus, two of the three attending anti-Hamas campaigns – Operation Pillar of Defence (November 14–21, 2012) and Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 10–21, 2021) – were of a short duration and were limited to airstrikes, whereas the ground manoeuvre in the much longer Operation Protective Edge (July 7–26 August 2014) was only launched on July 17 after Hamas rejected an Egyptian ceasefire initiative that Israel accepted, and was terminated on August 5 – three weeks before the end of hostilities. Had Hamas accepted the Egyptian proposal, there would have been no ground manoeuvre.⁶⁵

So anxious was the military leadership to avoid a ground operation that at the cabinet meeting that approved the operation, Chief-of-staff Benny Gantz and then-Intelligence chief Aviv Kochavi went out of their way to reassure the ministers that Hamas had no appetite for a major confrontation, on the one hand, and to scare them off a land invasion, on the other. The destruction of Hamas and the reoccupation of Gaza, they warned, would be a multiyear, painful effort that would spread chaos and mayhem across the strip; exact hundreds of Israeli and thousands of Palestinian lives; require some NIS10 billion (\$2.8 billion) in direct costs (and nearly three times as much in reconstruction costs); spark mass riots in the West Bank and among Israel's Arab citizens; and endanger the Egyptian and Jordanian peace treaties.⁶⁶ Asked on July 15, following Hamas's rejection of the Egyptian ceasefire initiative, whether the IDF was capable of conquering the strip and at what cost, Gantz told the cabinet that he would rather hold this strategic discussion on another occasion.⁶⁷

Given this defeatist mindset, it was hardly surprising that no plan for neutralising Hamas's tunnels existed at the onset of Operation Protective Edge despite their definition as a strategic threat as early as late 2013 and Netanyahu's request from Defence Minister Yaalon at a cabinet meeting a week before the operation to present such a plan within a day.⁶⁸ As a result, the first ten days of the operation were exclusively limited to air strikes on Hamas targets, and it was only when scores of terrorists emerged from an underground tunnel inside Israel on July 17 to attack military targets, in a resounding rebuff of the Egyptian ceasefire initiative, that the IDF launched a limited ground operation against offensive tunnels penetrating into Israel. By the time hostilities were over on August 26, only about half of these tunnels had been neutralised or destroyed despite the cabinet's instruction to destroy/neutralise all of them.⁶⁹

In the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge, the IDF embarked on a multiyear effort to neutralise Hamas's offensive tunnels, which culminated in the construction of a 40-mile-long subterranean as well as above-ground barrier along the Gaza-Israel border at the cost of NIS 3.5 billion (\$1.1 billion).⁷⁰ This made eminent sense since these tunnels posed the clear and present danger of a large-scale terrorist invasion of Israel. Yet the lack of comprehensive planning against the hundreds-km-long 'defensive' tunnels crisscrossing Gaza (and South Lebanon), on which Hamas (and Hezbollah) predicated their war fighting strategy, meant that for all the hyperbole in Chief-of-staff Eisenkot's 2015 doctrinal manifesto about the 'creative/maneuver approach' being the IDF's 'main approach to achieving a decision',⁷¹ the aversion to large-scale ground operations remained as deeply entrenched as ever. This was illustrated both by the substantial reduction of the ground forces on Eisenkot's watch (2015–19) and by the continued reliance on air power, most notably exemplified by Eisenkot's 'Dahiya doctrine', alluding to the massive destruction wrought on the Beirut Shiite quarter and Hezbollah's beating heart during the Second Lebanon War. In the words of Aviv Kochavi, who in January 2019 succeeded Eisenkot as chief-of-staff:

A third Lebanon war will see a powerful [air] attack that they have never experienced . . . The scope of targets that we have today – as a result of major changes that we made in intelligence – is unprecedented . . . Lebanon is blanketed with thousands and thousands of targets . . . and there are waves of firepower that will strike all of these targets and will cause large and unprecedented damage to Lebanon, including to national infrastructure that supports terror, such as electricity power stations and other infrastructure . . . I say to the residents of Lebanon: 'I advise you to leave [the area of hostilities], not only at the beginning of the war, but from the beginning of tension and before the first shot is fired. I advise you to leave those areas because the attack force will be unimaginable like nothing you have witnessed before.'⁷²

In line with this fixation with airpower, the purported ground manoeuvre (code named 'Lightning Strike') – prepared in the event of a major Gaza conflagration – was not aimed at the conquest of the strip or parts of it but rather was a decoy to lure hundreds of Hamas terrorists into certain strategic tunnels (dubbed 'the metro' by the IDF), only to have them killed in their hideouts by massive airstrikes. And while the plan's execution during the May 2021 Operation Guardian of the Walls caused much fewer casualties, it was nevertheless lauded as a 'physical and psychological blow' that tarnished Hamas's operational rationale and shook its self-confidence.⁷³

Small wonder that when instructed by the cabinet to destroy Hamas's military and political capabilities after the 10/7 massacres, the IDF had no plan for the strip's conquest and had to prepare it at great haste.⁷⁴ Even then, its adoption of a cautious step-by-step linear approach, rather than a bold multidirectional attempt to encircle the strip in one fell swoop through

simultaneous assaults in Gaza City, Khan Younis and Rafah, reflected the general staff's perennial timidity and lack of confidence in the ground forces' ability to rise to the challenge. This resulted in the war's inordinate prolongation despite the ground forces' surprisingly impressive exploits, described by John Spencer, one of the world's foremost experts on urban warfare, as 'a new standard for urban warfare ... [that] will be studied by many militaries'.⁷⁵ A clear case of lions led by donkeys, to borrow the British famous depiction of their Crimean War and World War I experiences.

Containment and its discontents

This endemic aversion to anything that smacked of large-scale ground operations was not only a corollary of the IDF's steadily dwindling ground forces and equipment, or the 'mowing the grass' philosophy that substituted protracted attrition for decisive victory, but also of the growing fear of battlefield losses that gained hold of the general staff's psyche during the Oslo years. Shared by the political echelons, the mass media, and the public at large,⁷⁶ this inversion of the normal civil-military interrelationship in which the armed forces are designed to keep the citizenry out of harm's way rather than the other way around was translated to decades-long reactive containment policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians and Hezbollah, encapsulated in Ehud Barak's handy quip, 'Quiet will be answered by quiet'.⁷⁷ As a recent study by the IDF's history department explained:

Since the late 1990s, the limited conflict concept struck roots in the IDF ... The new vocabulary included such terms as 'containment' and 'exhaustion [of the enemy]' at the expense of such traditional terms as 'battlefield decision [victory]' and 'deterrence,' in addition to renunciation of such fundamental precepts of Israel's national security as shifting the war to the enemy's territory or conquering territory ... leading to a steady deterioration of the security situation.⁷⁸

This containment policy started with Rabin and Peres's obliviousness to the terrorist surge sparked by the Oslo process (the notorious 'victims of peace' oxymoron) and continued with Barak and Sharon's abstention from suppressing the 'al-Aqsa Intifada' until April 2002, in what Sharon oxymoronically hailed as 'restraint is power'. It was then manifested in the six years attending the May 2000 Lebanon flight when Israel repeatedly failed to make good on its threats of draconian retaliation for terrorist attacks until it was reluctantly sucked into the Second Lebanon War. Even then, the conflagration was perceived as a 'mowing the grass' operation wrought large rather than a fully-fledged war. In the words of the Winograd commission: 'The government didn't want war, didn't intend to initiate it, and didn't know it

was going to war. Only in March 2007 did the government officially decide that what transpired had indeed been war'.⁷⁹

Hezbollah

While its architects portrayed the Lebanon war as a shining success that led to a prolonged period of calm, Hezbollah was not deterred from sporadic attacks on Israeli targets in subsequent years while continuing to transform South Lebanon into an entrenched terrorist stronghold in flagrant violation of Resolution 1701. With thousands of well-armed and battle-hardened terrorists deployed along the joint border in a constant state of alert to invade northern Israel and occupy border communities – an inconceivable scenario since the 1948 war – and Hezbollah's 150,000-strong rocket/missile arsenal capable of hitting any target in Israel, a 'balance of terror' evolved between the Jewish state and the terrorist organisation. This drove successive Israeli governments, and the IDF, to go out of their way to avert a major conflagration, mainly by confining the sustained effort to frustrate Hezbollah's military build-up to airstrikes on its supply routes in Syria (in what came to be known as 'the campaign between the wars') – to the almost complete exclusion of Lebanon.

This timidity was most starkly illustrated in October 2022, when war threats by Hezbollah, backed by the dispatch of three UAVs towards an Israeli gas field in the eastern Mediterranean, drove the Israeli government to drop its decade-long negotiating position and to accede to Beirut's demands regarding the demarcation of the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border and the ownership of the substantial gas deposits believed to be in the disputed area.⁸⁰ Eager to have it signed before the November 1 general elections, Prime Minister Yair Lapid failed to bring the agreement to Knesset approval as had been done with all previous Arab-Israeli accords, on the pretext that a quick approval would stave off an imminent war. 'Israel is not afraid of Hezbollah', he gloated, 'the IDF is stronger than any terrorist organization. At the same time, if we can avoid war, it is the job of any responsible government to do so'.⁸¹

This view was staunchly backed by the IDF, which also provided the Supreme Court with classified information allegedly proving the deal's 'vital need', so as to allow the dismissal of four petitions contesting the caretaker government's right to sign the agreement.⁸² Chief-of-staff Kochavi declared that the deal 'does not preserve our security, it improves it'⁸³ while a host of retired generals sang the deal's praise, notably Amos Yadlin, former military intelligence chief and a long-time director of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), home to many retired senior officers and the security establishment's foremost 'academic' echo chamber, who lauded the agreement as a 'win-win'. His fellow intelligence bigwig, Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilead, defined the agreement as 'a vital strategic need for

Israel's national security' that would not only postpone for a long time the spectre of an Israel-Hezbollah war – probably with Iranian intervention – but might also lay the groundwork for Lebanon's extrication from Hezbollah's grip by helping to kick off the country's economic recovery. 'Failing to sign the agreement, mainly for political reasons, will be an injustice to the state [of Israel] and its citizens', he warned.⁸⁴

These predictions were as deluded as Barak's May 2000 gloating that the Lebanon flight had drained Hezbollah's terrorist marsh. With a Hezbollah spokesman aptly boasting that 'if it were not for Nasrallah's gun that was placed on the head of the Israeli government, [the deal] would not have happened',⁸⁵ by February 2023, Yadlin was warning that deterioration in Palestinian-Israeli relations might trigger an armed confrontation with Hezbollah given Nasrallah's 'self-confidence over all that happened during the demarcation of the economic border in the Mediterranean'.⁸⁶ Indeed, no sooner had Israel responded to the 10/7 massacres than Hezbollah began raining rockets and suicide drones on population centres and military bases in the Galilee and firing anti-tank missiles on residential buildings. With tens of thousands of Israelis fleeing border communities to avoid a possible ground invasion – an inconceivable scenario prior to the 2000 flight – one cannot but recall Winston Churchill's seminal pre-World War II warning: 'You were given the choice between war and dishonor. You chose dishonor, and you will have war'.

Gaza

While the destruction of the West Bank's terrorist infrastructure during the 'al-Aqsa Intifada' enabled Israel to keep terrorism in the area at bay through 'mowing the grass' operations, Sharon's failure to replicate this feat in Gaza, and the attendant 2005 disengagement, allowed Hamas to transform the strip into a terrorist hotbed that harassed Israel for over two decades as Sharon's successors proved equally reluctant to launch an all-out effort to suppress the organisation and demilitarise the strip as stipulated by the Oslo accords. As Netanyahu was to explain in his autobiography:

Destroying Hamas necessitates the introduction of substantial infantry forces into Gaza, something that might cause hundreds of fatalities on our side and many thousands [of fatalities] on the Palestinian side. Then there is the question as to whom we should surrender the newly-occupied Gaza with its two million residents. There was no other factor, apart from the IDF, which could govern the strip after its occupation, and this control could last for years. Could I tie the IDF to Gaza for an indefinite period of time, when the greater threat came from Iran – and possibly from the Syrian front? The unequivocal answer was No. We had far more important military goals.⁸⁷

By the time of the run-up to the 2005 disengagement, Sharon was told by his intelligence chiefs that the targeted killing of Hamas's founding

leader Ahmad Yassin and his immediate successor Abdul Aziz Rantisi (March–April 2004) had weakened the organisation to the extent of preventing it from ousting the Palestinian Authority that ruled Gaza at the time and, thus, transforming the strip into ‘ *Hamas-land* ’.⁸⁸ In a similar vein, a public announcement by 180 retired generals and top security officials published in all major Israeli newspapers lauded the looming disengagement as a major boost to Israel’s national security, which would ‘ *improve the security forces’ operational capabilities and provide them with [international] legitimacy [to retaliate for a Gaza-originated aggression]; generate a strategic and diplomatic change; and open up prospects for [a peace] arrangement’*.⁸⁹ As these predictions failed to materialise with Hamas decisively winning the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections in the West Bank and Gaza and a year later ejecting the PLO from the strip, Intelligence Chief Yadlin welcomed the move as a positive step that would enable Israel to treat Gaza as a hostile entity while cooperating with a PLO-controlled West Bank.⁹⁰

What this ‘ *special treatment* ’ meant in practice was another year-and-a-half of restraint vis-à-vis Hamas’s steadily escalating rocket attacks on Israel’s towns and villages before the government saw no other choice but to launch Operation Cast Lead in an attempt to buy another period of relative calm. Indeed, no sooner had a ceasefire entered into force than Yadlin pronounced Hamas to be deterred with Defence Minister Barak joining this buoyant assessment. ‘ *It is necessary to respond and we will’*, Barak told the cabinet. ‘ *But we are not staying in the Gaza Strip. Shooting will stop as a result of deterrence. As in previous incidents, [there will be] more rocket[s] and more mortar shell[s] till it all calms down’*.⁹¹

As defence minister under Netanyahu, who on 31 March 2009, assumed the premiership for the second time in a decade, Barak not only sustained this containment policy of ad hoc aerial retaliation for ‘ *more missiles and more mortar shells’*, with the partial exception of the November 2012 Operation Pillar of Defence, but also expressed readiness to cooperate with Hamas, should it mend the fences with the PLO/PA. ‘ *Israel is the strongest country for 1,000 miles around Jerusalem, and we should be self-confident enough not to lose sight of what has to be done’*, he told an American academic journal. ‘ *What we need is a sense of direction and a readiness to take decisions. We have to do it’*.⁹²

It is doubtful whether Barak believed his own gloating. For otherwise he would have likely pursued Operation Cast Lead’s ground manoeuvre to its natural conclusion as PM Olmert allegedly wanted rather than seek to end it at the first available opportunity; and he might have expanded Operation Pillar of Defence to include a ground campaign so as to give Israel a much longer respite at the very least. It is clear, however, that the IDF’s endemic aversion to ground operations and the attendant fear of escalation reflected no self-perception as ‘ *the strongest army for 1,000 miles around Jerusalem’*.

And nothing underscored this timidity more starkly than the systematic evasion of the threat of Hamas's massive underground tunnel system, tens of which were estimated to be 'offensive tunnels' penetrating into Israel.

The problem ensued as early as the PA's 1994 takeover of the Gaza Palestinians, when Hamas and other local groups began to build an extensive tunnel network under the strip's border with Egypt for smuggling weapons, drugs, and other illicit merchandise. It was then expanded underneath the strip for terrorist purposes, with seven IDF soldiers killed in 2001–04 by tunnel-originated attacks and another seven killed while seeking to neutralise the tunnel threat.⁹³ Then came the June 2006 attack, in which Hamas terrorists infiltrated Israel via an underground tunnel, killing two soldiers and abducting another, and brought the problem in its full severity to Israeli public attention. Yet while the IDF's planning directorate prepared a 'road-map for underground fighting' as early as February 2008, no comprehensive plan for neutralising the tunnels was prepared, no operational or organisational measures to this end were taken, and the intelligence directorate did not even include the tunnel threat on its list of vital national targets until 2015.⁹⁴ Indeed, in their numerous appearances before the cabinet, the intelligence heads consistently refrained from mentioning the tunnel threat whereas Chief-of-staff Gantz downplayed its significance in his rare allusions to the issue. In May 2013, for example, he told the cabinet that the tunnels posed 'a threat of an attack, but not of a major assault', reassuring ministers that this threat was not 'very significant' as it could 'only' include 'a few hundred people' – a rather odd reassurance given that the 2006 incident that caused Israel untold strategic damage when the abducted soldier was exchanged for 1,027 imprisoned terrorists, some of whom masterminded the 10/7 massacres, was carried out by a mere seven terrorists.⁹⁵

Much worse: in the months preceding Operation Protective Edge, the top security echelon – Defence Minister Yaalon, Chief-of-staff Gantz, Intelligence chief Kochavi, and Shin Bet director Cohen – withheld vital information from the cabinet about an imminent 'major hostile activity' by Hamas, apparently for fear that they might be instructed to pre-empt the looming aggression, whose precise timing was unknown due to significant intelligence gaps, thus risking a general conflagration.⁹⁶

Emblematic of the security establishment's mindset during the Oslo years in general, and after the Lebanon and Gaza withdrawals in particular, this timidity persisted all the way to the 10/7 massacres, or indeed in their aftermath, manifested as it was in simultaneous and contradictory behavioural patterns: pervasive scaremongering of the exorbitant costs of a Gaza ground manoeuvre, on the one hand, and persistent diminution of Hamas's terrorist threat and activities (and total obliviousness to PLO terrorism), on the other. It did not seem to occur to the security leaders that if Hamas was powerful enough to exact a high human toll from

manoeuvring forces, it was also capable of inflicting similar pain on the Israeli homeland. With memories of the 'al-Aqsa Intifada's' daily suicide bombings and shooting attacks long forgotten in Israel, Hamas's threat was almost exclusively associated with the firing of rockets/missiles at Israel's population centres, most of which could be intercepted by the Iron Dome system. Even after the IDF's leadership was grudgingly forced to acknowledge the threat of Hamas's offensive tunnels during Operation Protective Edge, it still relegated the threat to 'limited terrorist penetration for terrorist or PR purposes'⁹⁷ and believed the threat to have been eliminated altogether with the completion of the underground barrier in December 2021. At the same time, the general staff totally ignored the possibility of a large-scale on-ground invasion from Gaza despite chiefs-of-staff Kochavi and Halevy's definition of Hamas (and Hezbollah) as terrorist armies – not 'merely' terrorist organisations.⁹⁸

In a programmatic article on 'Multidimensional Defense', then-Southern Command GOC (general officer commanding, 2018–21) Halevy mentioned Hezbollah and Hamas's intention to penetrate Israel's territory in order 'to inflict damage, take prisoners, and, moreover, have an adverse effect on public opinion and resonate through the media that something unprecedented has happened'. Yet, in discussing the various types of threats confronting Israel and the required defence measures for their neutralisation, including the threat of underground penetration, he made no mention of the possibility of a land invasion.⁹⁹ In line with this thinking, the IDF dissolved some civilian 'alert squads' in border communities, designed to defend their residents in the event of enemy penetration/invasion; members of other squads were stripped of their 'long weapons' (e.g. rifles, machine guns), which were locked in central storerooms outside the respective communities, thus making their use in emergency situations virtually impossible and forcing many squad members to fight the well-armed Hamas terrorists on 10/7 with their much inferior private handguns. When squad leaders protested of this decision, they were told that there was no need for alarm since the underground barrier had rendered a significant terrorist penetration virtually impossible. A war scenario in the year preceding the 10/7 massacres envisaged up to ten direct hits in a certain border kibbutz (by anti-tank missiles and similar weapons) but made no mention of a terrorist penetration. 'I once jokingly told the division commander: "Don't you think a bulldozer can tear down the [security] fence?"' recalled the head of a border kibbutz alert squad. 'But what do I understand? You go to a specialist surgeon, and if he says that you need surgery you undergo surgery'.¹⁰⁰

Apart from the simultaneous underestimation of Hamas's offensive capabilities and overestimation of its defensive prowess, the failure to imagine a large-scale land invasion reflected the conceptual conservatism, indeed laziness, of the top IDF echelons. Just as it took them nearly two decades to

grudgingly acknowledge the subterranean threat, so they were loath to entertain the thought that their supposedly fool-proof solution to this problem – the \$1.1 billion underground barrier – had been rendered useless even before it became fully operational. So much so that several months into the 2023–24 war, IDF officers claimed that the subterranean barrier had proved its worth on 10/7 since not a single terrorist invaded Israel via the tunnels, as if this would have made the slightest difference.¹⁰¹

But above all, this persistent reluctance to look danger in the eye in the (subconscious?) hope that it will not look back was a corollary of the Oslo delusion that Israel had entered an era of peace in which Hamas's terrorist threat was but a nuisance, however disturbing at times, which could be contained at an acceptable national cost. Needless to say, the threat of PLO terrorism, let alone the perpetration of a 10/7-style atrocity in the West Bank – something that was well within its reach and was repeatedly lauded by senior PLO officials – was totally overlooked. Ignoring the fact that the West Bank's prolonged relative calm was a direct result of the suppression of the PLO's 2000–04 war of terror ('al-Aqsa Intifada') and the subsequent decades-long counterterrorist activities, the security establishment continued to view the existence of 'a functioning and strong Palestinian Authority, with effective security mechanisms' as indispensable for the IDF's ability 'to fulfill its missions' (to use the most recent words of an outgoing Central Command GOC) rather than the genocidal enemy it had always been.¹⁰² Small wonder that the IDF Spokesperson's Office went out of its way to excise any hint of PLO terrorism from its regular reports of detained West Bank terrorists published during the 2023–24 war, noting only Hamas detainees and making no mention of the larger number of PLO detainees.¹⁰³ Likewise, when on July 24, the IDF and Shin Bet killed Tul Karm's Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and PLO local commanders, the IDF spokesperson mentioned the organisational affiliation of the first two slain terrorists but not that of the PLO commander, euphemising him as 'a terrorist in a local terrorist grouping'.¹⁰⁴

Thus ensued the thesis of a 'deterred Hamas' whereby skilful use of the stick-and-carrot could keep the terrorist organisation at bay for determined periods of time. This ranged inter alia from Yadlin and Barak's assertion of a deterred Hamas after Operation Cast Lead (Dec. 2008–Jan. 2009), to Gantz's claim after Operation Pillar of Defence (2012) that, 'Our deterrence remains stable. Hamas is not interested in losing control',¹⁰⁵ to Eisenkot's assertion that the year attending Operation Protective Edge (2014) was 'the calmest of many years. Not one soldier suffered a scratch, and not one civilian was harmed'.¹⁰⁶ And from Intelligence chief Haliva's prediction that Hamas's military setbacks in Operation Guardian of the Walls (2021), together with Israel's prudent economic policy in Gaza, would lead to a five-year calm,¹⁰⁷ to Kochavi's assessment upon his retirement: 'Hamas understands that it suffered very painful blows, and, moreover, understands that all its military

operations achieved nothing. Therefore, it chose a policy that doesn't carry out terrorist attacks against Israel but rather focuses on improving the economic lot [of the Gaza populace].¹⁰⁸ Two months before the 10/7 massacres, INSS director Tamir Hayman, who as IDF intelligence chief asserted in 2019 that ' Hamas is greatly deterred from war', claimed that 'we are not on the eve of a multi-front war a la a Yom Kippur War-style scenario'.¹⁰⁹

This presumed deterrence was not only seen as a corollary of the severity of Israel's retaliation for Hamas's attacks (i.e. the stronger the reaction, the longer the lull) but also, perhaps even more importantly, of the prevalence and quality of the proffered carrots: hence the security establishment's persistent pressure to introduce thousands of Gazan (and West Bank) workers to Israel; hence Halevy's insistence, as Southern Command GOC, on the incorporation of 'political-economic-international' considerations into the Gaza operational plans; and hence the IDF's staunch support for the regular influx of Qatari money in support of Hamas's civil administration in the strip after the PA suspended the transfer of these funds in 2018 (Halevy even accompanied Mossad head Yossi Cohen to Doha to negotiate an increase in Gaza support).¹¹⁰ In Chief-of-staff Eisenkot's words:

Instead of receiving \$15 million from the PA, they [Hamas] receive it from Qatar. This is not protection or anything like this. It is funding of an administration that arrives via a different route. This, too, benefits our mutual interests . . . [because] the Gaza problem is not just a military problem that can be resolved through the use of a stick. It is a far more complex and complicated problem that requires multidimensional handling in order to prevent the very negative direction towards which the strip is headed.¹¹¹

Brig. Gen. Amit Saar, head of the intelligence directorate's research department who failed to anticipate the 10/7 massacres, further elaborated on this concept in a newspaper interview upon assuming his post in July 2020:

Hamas has no interest in confrontation with Israel, it is deterred. What worries it most is the economic situation in the strip . . . The state [building] component in Hamas's perception is becoming more pronounced. From the outset Hamas had two identities – a religious resistance movement and a national movement. Since 2007, it has also been Gaza's sovereign, and it is judged in this capacity on a daily basis. The main factor that determines the reality confronting Hamas is the economy.¹¹²

In Saar's opinion, in contrast to their totalitarian counterparts in the Arab world, Hamas leaders were genuinely interested in Gazans' socioeconomic wellbeing: 'Yahya Sinwar grew up in the Khan Younis refugee camp and his family is still there, and Ismail Haniyeh grew up in the Shati refugee camp. Hence, when Gazans were suffocated economically, they sent us aggressive signals'. This is not to say that Sinwar had eschewed his ideological

commitment to Israel's destruction, but he was in no rush to do so 'because he lives in different time terms from us; he believes that eternity is on his side. In the meantime, he wants a fundamental improvement in Gaza's [economic] position ... so long as he feels that there is progress – projects, international money – he will bite his lips. But should he think that there is no progress or that he is being toyed with, he will signal us [via military escalation]'. This means that while Hamas remained very much deterred by Israel, 'there is one thing that is stronger than deterrence: desperation. You can't deter a desperate [person]'.¹¹³

Evoking the age-old Zionist hope that the vast economic gains attending the Jewish national revival would ameliorate Palestinian enmity and ease the path for mutual reconciliation,¹¹⁴ this analysis miscomprehends the essence of the threat confronting Israel. For one thing, it is not desperation that has driven Palestinian terrorism since the onset of the conflict a century ago but the hope to destroy the Jewish national revival, to which the Oslo process has given a tremendous boost. For another thing, in the modern world, socio-economic progress has rarely been a recipe for political moderation and inter-communal coexistence but has often been superseded by nationalist, religious, and xenophobic extremism. Nor have the poor and the oppressed led the great revolutions and/or carried out the worst deeds of violence, but rather the militant vanguards from among the better educated and more moneyed circles of society. So, it has been with the Palestinian Arabs, whose political extremism and propensity for violence, from the days of the British mandate (1920–48) to the present, have intensified in tandem with improvement in their socioeconomic lot.

As early as 1937, a British commission of enquiry on the wholesale Arab violence that raged across Mandatory Palestine at the time observed, 'With almost mathematical precision, the betterment of the economic situation in Palestine meant the deterioration of the political situation'.¹¹⁵ Six decades later, Arafat and the PLO leadership similarly threw away Palestinian socioeconomic wellbeing by using the Oslo process as a Trojan horse for Israel's attempted destruction (while lining their own pockets from the proceeds of this tragedy). At the time of the White House ceremony, socioeconomic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza were far better than in most neighbouring Arab states, having experienced a tenfold rise in per-capita GNP over the preceding two decades. By the time of Arafat's death in November 2004, his terror war had slashed Palestinian income per head to a fraction of its earlier levels with numerous Palestinians reduced to poverty and despondency.¹¹⁶

If this was the attitude of the 'moderate' Palestinian faction, the hope to lure Hamas into becoming a 'normal' sovereign immersed in administering the territory under its control, let alone any belief in its concern for the wellbeing of ordinary Gazans or its reluctance to throw this wellbeing away

for the sake of ideological precepts, could not be more detached from reality. Not least, since, as the Muslim Brotherhood's Palestinian offshoot, Hamas is no ordinary national liberation movement in search of self-determination but rather a militant Islamist group viewing its war against Israel as a direct extension of Islam's millenarian jihad to expand its domain and prevent the surrender of any of its lands to the infidels. As such, the destruction of Israel and the **temporary** creation of a Palestinian state on its ruins is not an end in and of itself but a steppingstone to the establishment of the worldwide Muslim community (or *umma*), or rather caliphate.¹¹⁷ In the words of Hamas senior leader Mahmoud Zahar:

Islamic and traditional views reject the notion of establishing an independent Palestinian state . . . Therefore, it is not allowed to establish an Arabic state over the land of Palestine alone . . . The Islamists' view, which Hamas adheres to, is that a great Muslim state must be established, with Palestine being a part of it . . . Our main goal is to establish a great Islamic state, be it pan-Arabic or pan-Islamic.¹¹⁸

With the head of the intelligence organ responsible for Israel's national security assessment (and a supposed top Palestinian expert) totally mindless of the essence of Hamas's religiosity and its far-reaching implications, it is hardly surprising that the research department, and by extension the intelligence directorate and the IDF leadership as a whole, consistently misinterpreted numerous writings on the wall. This blindness was already evident in Saar's 2020 interview when contrary to his assertion that Sinwar was deterred and in no rush to see Israel's destruction, the arch terrorist was busy planning the 10/7 massacres¹¹⁹ and grew exponentially in the year preceding the atrocity. Thus, it was that in July 2022 the Gaza division's intelligence officer presented the divisional commander with a 40-page report titled 'Hamas's Grand Raid Plan', which described a multipronged invasion by at least 20 *nukhba* (elite) squads supported by over 54 engineering units that would breach the security barrier across dozens of spots in what was defined as the 'gravest threat confronting the IDF's defence'. The next month the intelligence officer, accompanied by the divisional commander and Southern Command GOC, presented the report to Haliva, only to leave the intelligence chief totally unimpressed as evidenced by his infamous prediction a few weeks later of a five-year quiet in the Gaza Strip.¹²⁰

Flowing from the top down, this hubris was manifested not only in the systematic dismissal of repeated warnings by field intelligence operatives – notably a persistent analyst in the famed 8200 communications and cyberwarfare unit who amassed massive evidence of Hamas's irregular activities, and months-long reporting by female soldiers in border observation posts of suspicious Hamas activities and anomalies – but also in the steady reduction of combat forces along the Gaza border with only one armoured battalion

defending the entire area (half of its troops were on vacation on 10/7) alongside depleted infantry forces. And to add insult to injury, some of the female operators, most of whom were butchered on 10/7 while a few were abducted to Gaza, were threatened with court martial by their commanding officers if they continued to keep on raising the alarm.¹²¹

Such was the extent of wilful blindness that by early October 2023, the intelligence directorate was buoyant about the ‘potential of calm’ in the strip. For his part, the new Gaza division’s intelligence officer, despite irregular Hamas communication traffic and a ‘steep rise’ in the training activity of six *nuhba* battalions – that is 3,000–4,000 fighters, the approximate number of terrorists who invaded Israel – estimated that ‘for the time being, the situation seems to be moving toward an arrangement and relaxation of tensions’.¹²² A similar message was relayed to Netanyahu in a special security consultation on October 1, whereby the IDF and the Shin Bet heads expected eased tensions during the Sukkot holidays yet stressed that the continuation of the relative calm in the strip necessitated an increase in the number of Gazan workers in Israel.¹²³ As a result, the IDF was put on a low alert level during the week-long holiday while its operations department approved the Supernova open air music festival, only a couple of miles from the Gaza border, which was to become the main site of mass massacres on 10/7 with over 360 celebrators slaughtered and some 40 abducted. As late as October 7, 3.17 am – three hours before Hamas’s invasion and an hour before the participation of Director Bar in the fateful phone consultation with the IDF’s top brass – a Shin Bet memo reported ‘a string of unusual signs which, on strict interpretation, indicates an emergency deployment’, yet concluded that ‘Hamas is not interested in escalation and/or in initiating a confrontation at the present time’.¹²⁴

Defying the government, deconstructing the IDF

What made this steady slide to catastrophe all the more galling is that the political echelon was by and large kept in the dark about Hamas’s alarming signs all the way to the fateful 10/7 consultation and the early days of the war, where Chief-of-staff Halevy reportedly failed to inform Defence Minister Gallant and Prime Minister Netanyahu of a planned rescue operation (which he eventually did not authorise) to free hostages who were believed to be held in Gaza’s Shifa hospital.¹²⁵

The significance of this phenomenon cannot be overstated. To be sure, Israel’s unique position as a state under constant security threat has given the IDF, and the security establishment more generally, excessive power vis-à-vis the political echelon. So much so that a common Israeli quip describes the IDF as an army that owns a state. Suffice it to note the general staff’s May 1967 ultimatum to Prime Minister Eshkol to break the

tightening pan-Arab noose around Israel, or the 2011–12 aborting of an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities by the combined effort of the IDF chief-of-staff and the Shin Bet and Mossad directors. Yet the withholding of vital national security information from the political echelon for such a prolonged period of time, not to mention the failure to alert it to a likely immediate attack, amounted to nothing less than an effective military coup – the culmination of a year-long civil disobedience, fuelled by a massive incitement campaign that rejected the very legitimacy of the Likud-led government – which had just won the national elections – and urged its extra-parliamentary overthrow.

On the face of it, this turmoil was sparked by the government’s planned legal reform, misrepresented by the incitement campaign as a deliberate attempt to transform Israel from a thriving democracy into a ‘messianic theocratic dictatorship’. In fact, it was the culmination of the Left’s decades-long refusal to accept its intractable loss of dominance to ‘Second Israel’ – a motley coalition of long-marginalised segments of Israeli society, from Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s Revisionist movement and its current Likud incarnation, to Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews, to religious and ultra-Orthodox communities.¹²⁶ Epitomised by a senior Labour politician’s infamous refusal to ‘accept the people’s choice’ after Likud’s May 1977 first-ever electoral win, this rejectionism was catapulted to unprecedented heights during the Oslo years as the bloodletting unleashed by the ‘peace process’ dealt a mortal blow to the Left’s hopes to return to power, let alone to regain its historic hegemony. If in 1992 Labour enjoyed a comfortable majority of 44 of the Knesset’s 120 seats to Likud’s 32, by November 2022, it had been reduced to just four seats (to Likud’s 32) – the threshold for entering the Knesset.

Into this vacuum stepped a string of dictatorially-run ‘atmosphere parties’ subordinating the national interest to their leaders’ personal ambitions, which siphoned the traditional Left’s electorate. And while they failed to win any elections as the demographic balance had irrevocably tilted in favour of ‘Second Israel’ and those disillusioned with the Oslo disaster, they nevertheless retained control of the country’s key institutions, notably the IDF, the security services, the legal system, the media, and academia, which they consistently used to undermine Likud-led governments at every turn. It was only Sharon’s Kadima ‘atmosphere party’ that managed to win the elections and form a government in 2006, only to lose power three years later to Likud and evaporate into thin air by the 2013 elections. Likud, by contrast, went on to win the next six parliamentary elections: in 2013, 2015, April 2019, September 2019, 2020, and 2021. Yet after the 2021 elections, a group of ‘atmosphere parties’, whose leaders had nothing in common beyond the burning desire to unseat the long-reigning Netanyahu after repeatedly failing to do so at the ballot box, formed a rightwing-leftist-Islamist coalition with Naphtalie Bennett, leader of the tiny Yamina

(Rightwards) party, becoming prime minister, to be replaced mid-term by Yair Lapid, founding leader of the Yesh Atid 'atmosphere party'.

While this move was legal, as no legislator had ever envisaged such an improbable scenario, Bennet's appointment set a dangerous anti-democratic precedent whereby leaders with no public support – his 'atmosphere party' held a fifth of Likud's Knesset seats – could blackmail their way to the prime minister's office. Small wonder that his appointment set in motion a string of declarations by other small parties' leaders of their suitability for Israel's top job. Even Barak, whose brief disastrous premiership ended in the worst electoral defeat in Israel's history, had no qualms about pronouncing himself two decades later the most qualified person for the job – shortly after failing to re-enter Knesset yet again. 'If, Heaven forbid, Bibi [Netanyahu] were to disappear one noon next week', he told a group of militant retired air force pilots seeking Netanyahu's overthrow by extra-parliamentary means, 'and there is the possibility of deterioration with Hezbollah or the Iranians, or [there is another] crisis, and the social and economic crisis continues, and there is a need for decisions regarding Iran, annexation, etc., then objectively I am more suitable and better prepared than anyone in Israel to seize the helm'.¹²⁷

Having left Labour in January 2011 together with four other MKs to form his own short-lived Atzmaut (Independence) party so he could retain the defence portfolio in Netanyahu's government from which Labour decided to secede, Barak waged a relentless defamation campaign against his former superior once he left the government in 2013 after four years as its second most powerful member after Netanyahu. By 2017, he was predicting public resistance and civil disobedience, including refusal by the IDF and Shin Bet's top echelons to follow the government's orders: that is an effective military coup.¹²⁸ Two years later, having failed to re-enter Knesset within a new short-lived 'atmosphere party' he cofounded, Barak escalated his anti-Netanyahu incitement, openly calling for nationwide civil disobedience to prevent the prime minister's supposed attempt to set up a fully-fledged dictatorship under the guise of anti-Corona virus emergency measures. He was joined in this absurd claim by Lapid and Yaalon, who left Likud to establish his own stillborn party after being asked by Netanyahu to vacate the defence portfolio (which he had held for three years) so as to allow the rightwing Israel Beitenu party to join the ruling coalition.¹²⁹

As Likud was about to return to power after just one year in opposition, having won the November 2022 elections and established a 64-MKs ruling coalition, the anti-Netanyahu campaign spiralled to new heights. Even before the government's formation, Eisenkot, now a newly-elected MK, threatened to get one million people to the streets while a group of close Barak associates met in mid-December to plot mass civil disobedience that would topple the newly-elected government and to lay the organisational, logistic, financial,

and legal (i.e. aid provision) groundwork for this coup.¹³⁰ Fortunately for them, on 4 January 2023, less than a week from the government's formation, the justice minister announced an ambitious legal reform, which, unlike the corona scaremongering, enabled the dictatorship fantasy to stir a tidal wave of collective madness. Against the backdrop of the massive incitement campaign in the electronic, published, and social media, and huge billboards across the country warning of Israel's imminent transformation into a dictatorship, hundreds of thousands of alarmed Israelis took to the streets in months-long demonstrations led by a string of well-funded and organised 'protest' groups and organisations.

The government's attempt to curb the public restiveness by confining the reform to revision of the 'reasonableness standard' that allowed the Supreme Court to overturn government decisions – something that had even been amenable to Chief Justice Aharon Barak, father of Israel's legal revolution that bred the legal reform in the first place¹³¹ – backfired in grand style as the rapid slide to anarchy received a strong tailwind from those institutions still under effective Leftist control – the mainstream media, academia, and the legal system. In sharp contrast to the 2005 Gaza disengagement, when hundreds of protesters (including young teenage girls) were incarcerated for lengthy periods of time and persecuted, in 2023, only a handful of protesters were detained (but released within hours) as Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, a hostile leftover from the previous government, stipulated that 'there can be no effective protest without disturbing the public order'.¹³² Enabling protesters to operate with virtual impunity, this *carte blanche* for mayhem was quickly translated to countless acts of public disorder, from highway blocking, to setting bonfires in public places, to constant harassment of rightwing politicians and institutes, to virulent incitement and death threats against Netanyahu and his family members, to attempts to storm the PM's official residence, among other manifestations.

Particularly alarming was the rapidly widening refusal to do military reserve duty, spearheaded by an organisation that oxymoronically named itself 'Brothers in Arms' as it was busy deconstructing the IDF's collective ethos and comradeship. By mid-July 2023, after the reasonableness standard revision passed its first Knesset reading, Brothers in Arms claimed to have 20,000 signatories who would not answer the call of reserve duty, including a reported 1,800 reservists from intelligence and 'special missions' units. Collective statements by reservists from numerous IDF units about their refusal to serve were being publicised daily, and signing posts were placed throughout the country to enable individuals to join this dangerous trend. The situation was especially critical in the air force – the foremost symbol of Israel's omnipotence – where over a thousand pilots announced the suspension of 'voluntary reserve service' with the open endorsement of a dozen former IAF commanders and generals. One pilot put one crucial implication

of this refusal in a blunt and unmistakable fashion: ‘If you [the government] don’t stop [the legal reform], there will be no airstrike in Iran’.¹³³ Another pilot-turned-tycoon and a close associate of Barak, who played a central role in fomenting the public disorder, called for an ‘uncompressing war’ against the legal reform, which in his view endangered Israel more than its external enemies. ‘This thing will undoubtedly end with our victory’, he added:

The difference between our situation and that of other autocratic or dictatorial regimes is that in our case, which has no parallel in other states, the security power is us, the protestors, the economic power is us. We are the economy, and we are the solution to the country’s [problems] – not the government. There is absolutely no way they will defeat us.¹³⁴

Reflecting the growing hubris of the anti-government movement, this attempt to coerce the duly elected government of a thriving democracy to eschew policy decisions under the threat of military (in)action amounted to nothing short of an effective coup d’état. By mid-July, Brothers in Arms were threatening that if the government did not abandon the legal reform ‘the damage to the people’s army will be irreversible’ while a prominent ‘protest’ leader tweeted in late August, ‘In September, Netanyahu will be left without an army, as fitting for a dictator who has come to the end of his political road’.¹³⁵ In other words, the IDF would turn against its legal sovereign – the elected government of Israel. As a rebellious pilot told the air force commander who pleaded with the rebels to desist: ‘We swore to serve the kingdom, not the king’.¹³⁶

By this time, Brothers in Arms were openly urging the heads of the security services to fulfil their ‘sacred mission’ and save Israeli democracy from the government’s clutches. ‘Ronen Bar, Dedy Barne’a, Herzy Halevy: Are you ready?’ a TikTok clip exhorted the three security services heads to brace themselves for a move against the government:

A week before the Knesset discussions, Speaker Ohana threatens the Supreme Court and openly states that the government is headed towards a constitutional crisis. A government that doesn’t intend to obey the Supreme Court – the authorized interpreter of the law – is a rogue government. Shin Bet head, Mossad head, IDF chief-of-staff, the moment of truth is nearing. Be ready.¹³⁷

That such patently unlawful calls for the subversion of Israel’s democratic system under the false pretence of its attempted rescue could be made with impunity was yet another testament to the attorney general’s scandalous disregard of the spreading nationwide anarchy. No less galling was the warm endorsement of these calls and the refusal to do reserve duty by countless retired IDF generals and senior security officials, including former IDF chiefs-of-staff and Shin Bet and Mossad directors. Thus we have Barak, Eisenkot, Yaalon, and Halutz, who as chiefs-of-staff denounced service refusal in the strongest terms, not only supporting this very phenomenon

but also open insubordination by the security services heads.¹³⁸ This view was echoed by former Shin Bet director Nadav Argaman, who stated that ‘the [IDF] chief-of-staff and the Shin Bet head should tell Netanyahu “enough is enough” . . . we must stop this legislation **by any means**, we must not abide by the contract they signed with us’.¹³⁹ Yuval Diskin, another former Shin Bet director who had participated in the obstruction of the 2011–12 airstrike on Iran’s nuclear facilities, was even more forthright: ‘There is no shadow of a doubt – this is a government that acts against democracy’, he told a large demonstration in Tel Aviv. He added:

Tonight, I approach you: Chief-of-staff Herzy Halevy, Police Chief Kobi Shabtai, Shin Bet Head Ronen Bar, Mossad Head Dedy Barne’a, and Prisons Commissioner Katie Perry. I approach you tonight because you are the last line of defense before we are transformed from a substantive democracy into a dangerous autocracy . . . You must check and recheck every governmental instruction and consult the attorney general wherever there is a doubt . . . in the current circumstances, you must suspect any military operations initiated by the government and examine carefully their necessity . . . Don’t content yourselves with oral instructions from the political echelon, demand written instructions . . . You must always obey the rule of law according to the interpretation of the attorney general and the Supreme Court [and not that of the government – your legal superior] . . .¹⁴⁰

It is this fundamental rejection of the legitimacy of Netanyahu’s latest government (decried by Diskin as an amalgam of ‘racists, homophobes, ex-criminals, purveyors of lies, hatred, and polarisation . . . and draft dodgers’),¹⁴¹ or for that matter, any rightwing government, that undelay the military leadership’s feeble response to the refusal phenomenon and defiance of its political superior all the way to the 10/7 massacres.

Appointed in a legally-dubious last-minute usurpation by the Lapid-Bennett government under the false pretext of a security emergency (something that sounds incredible after 10/7),¹⁴² Halevy is a quintessential prototype of the IDF generalship caste in its post-Oslo incarnation. That is: a mostly left-leaning and increasingly ‘progressive’ sociopolitical group (as proven beyond the shadow of a doubt by their post-retirement statements, activities, and affiliations), resentful of its longstanding subordination to rightwing governments, and determined to secure its internal IDF hegemony in the face of the growing number of predominantly rightwing, proactive ‘Second Israel’ officers (notably from the national-religious and ‘settler’ sectors), who are far less amenable to the Oslo delusion and its defeatist operational manifestations. As Barak explained the main reason for his confidence that the heads of the security services would side with the Supreme Court against the government – their legal sovereign:

I happen to know the leaders; we call them the gatekeepers, defenders of authority: the head of the army, the chief-of-staff, the head of the Secret

Service, the head of Mossad, and the head of the police. They are solid characters. Three of them, for sure, and I hope also the head of the police. Three of them, all of them, together with myself, and Netanyahu and [Naphtalie] Bennett came from the same small unit, our equivalent of the SAS. In Israel, this equivalent of SAS is a kind of incubator for future leaders in all ways of life. So it happens that the chief-of-staff, the head of Mossad, and the head of the Secret Service are all veterans of the same unit. And we are educating them. I was the commander of the same unit . . . and I know how they operate . . . they are all very solid characters. When they face this contradiction, they will follow the Supreme Court and not their superior.¹⁴³

Barak's prediction was prescient. Rather than confront the refusal phenomenon head-on as had been done with the infinitely fewer refusal incidents during the 2005 disengagement or past individual refusals, where people were removed from their reserve units and at times prosecuted and imprisoned, the IDF treated the 2023 'refuseniks' with kid gloves. So much so that ten months into the Gaza war, when a prominent Brothers in Arms leader denied during a Knesset committee discussion that he had ever called for service refusal despite massive public evidence to the contrary, IDF spokesperson Hagari lauded the refusenik's military record only to back down under public protest in the improbable pretext of having been unaware of the culprit's well documented ceaseless incitement.¹⁴⁴

It was only on 27 March 2023, three months after the eruption of the mass civil disobedience, that Halevy issued a personal message to 'IDF commanders and soldiers in regular and reserve service', which stated that 'the place for protest expressions is in the public arena. They have no place in the IDF because their hurt is mortal. They undermine mutual solidarity and our enemies interpret it as a weakness and an opportune time to carry out their machinations'.¹⁴⁵ Yet, he blunted the strength of his message by also directing it to the regular army where no refusal cases were recorded and by failing to identify the instigators of this destructive phenomenon, let alone criticise the numerous retired generals and security officials supporting the refusal or ask them to desist.

Halevy was somewhat more forthright four months later when he urged reservists, in yet another public message 'to separate civilian protest and security service and to answer the call of duty' because 'no one of those who serve has the right to say that he doesn't serve anymore' and because 'the calls for service refusal hurt the IDF. . . . Our reservists are very dear to us and their contribution to national security is substantial', he said in an appeal to the refuseniks' better side. 'I appreciate all of them, including those who with a heavy heart took a difficult decision and signed with a trembling hand their refusal to do reserve duty. I call them to return to service'.¹⁴⁶

This was too little too late as service refusals had by then reached alarming proportions and its instigators were openly calling for a military coup. Yet

not only did Halevy fail to follow his emotional appeal with concrete enforcement measures (or to instruct the air force commander to do so), but he directed the attempt to defuse the crisis at the government rather than at the chaos fomenters in an attempt to force it to change tack. In early March, as the law committee was to pass the proposed reform to the Knesset's plenary, Halevy warned Netanyahu that deriding the refuseniks as anarchists – not the refuseniks' illegal activities – was detrimental to the IDF's operational capabilities and 'very hurtful to those responsible for Israel's security on a daily basis'. He reiterated the same message in yet another personal meeting in late July, telling Netanyahu that the harsh anti-refusal criticism by members of the Likud-led coalition – not the incitement to service refusal – caused the IDF untold damage.¹⁴⁷ And by way of upping the pressure on the government, Amit Saar, head of the intelligence directorate's research department, sent two letters to Netanyahu warning that Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas were watching closely the refusal crisis and might well be enticed into action should they conclude that the IDF, and Israel more generally, had been sufficiently enfeebled.¹⁴⁸

The significance of these letters cannot be overstated. Far from being a desperate bid to raise the alarm over an impending danger, as Netanyahu's critics were to claim after 10/7, they were a blatant attempt by the IDF leadership (it is inconceivable that Saar bypassed the chain of command – Intelligence chief Haliva and Chief-of-staff Halevy) to scaremonger the government into a humiliating U-turn under the Damocles sword of the 'refusal movement'. Had Saar been truly alarmed by the threats described in his letter, he would have used the communication channel for emergencies of such magnitude and issued an official urgent/top urgent warning to his IDF superiors and the political echelon (i.e. Gallant and Netanyahu), which would have been immediately discussed at both levels and most probably at the security cabinet as well. That no such alarm bell was ever rung¹⁴⁹ clearly indicates the letters' political motivation, especially in view of the intelligence directorate's year-long failure to alert the political echelon to 'Hamas's Grand Raid Plan' of which it was keenly aware.

Further proof of the letters' politicised intent is provided by their timing: the first was sent on 19 March 2023, as the Knesset law committee was about to pass the bill to the plenary; the second on July 16 – a week before the final abolition of the reasonableness standard by the Knesset's plenary. Even more indicative of the letters' function as an extortion tool rather than a true warning was Saar's purported intention, approved by Haliva and Halevy, to send an even more scathing letter to Netanyahu after the Simchat Torah holiday, only to be aborted by Hamas's attack on that very day.¹⁵⁰

If this was indeed the case, then it is clear that none of the three believed a single word in the purported letter. For otherwise, why did they not issue an urgent official warning of the imminent threats? Why did they (and the Shin

Bet) tell the political echelon a few days before 10/7 that the Gaza Strip was headed towards a more relaxed period, put the IDF on a low state of alert, and approve the Supernova party? Why did Haliva dismiss the possibility of a Hamas attack less than four hours before its occurrence rather than put the intelligence directorate on an immediate state of alert? Above all, why did Halevy and the other participants in the fateful phone consultation, from which Haliva was incomprehensively absent, decide to do nothing in the face of the gravest possible war indicators and fail to alert Gallant and Netanyahu to the unprecedented danger?

The truth of the matter is that neither Netanyahu nor any fair minded Israeli needed a reminder that the steady deconstruction of the IDF by the service-refusal movement – not the legal reform in and of itself, to which Hamas, Hezbollah, or Iran did not pay the slightest attention – blunted Israel's deterrent posture and left it open to external aggression.¹⁵¹ This was in fact the foremost grievance against the refusal movement, which the prime minister reiterated on many occasions, both in public and in cabinet meetings.¹⁵² Yet he felt that the government could not bow to the extortionist dictate of a small elitist military group, however critical for the IDF's operational preparedness, without dealing a mortal blow to Israeli democracy. As he put it at the cabinet meeting of July 16:

In democracy, the army is subordinate to the government and not the other way around, and in military regimes the government is subordinate to the army, or more precisely – to a certain group within the army. This is the fundamental difference between a democracy and a military regime. Both the incitement to refusal and the refusal itself are antithetical to democracy and the law. This is true with regard to every democracy, but in our case the refusal directly endangers the security of all of Israel's citizens. It erodes the deterrence vis-à-vis our enemies who could easily be tempted into acts of aggression against us and undermines military discipline, which is the edifice of the army's existence in the first place.¹⁵³

Conclusion

Some people learn nothing and forget nothing. Shortly after the September 1993 signing of the first PLO-Israel accord, Oslo's chief architect Yossi Beilin arrogantly prophesied that 'the greatest test of the accord will not be in the intellectual sphere, but will rather be a test of blood'. Should there be no significant drop in the level of violence and terrorism 'within a reasonable period of time' after the PA's formation, he argued, the process would be considered a failure, 'and should there be no choice, the IDF will return to those places which it is about to leave in the coming months'.¹⁵⁴

One might have hoped that, thirty-one years and 4,000 Israeli fatalities later, the abysmal failure of Oslo's 'test of blood' would be obvious to all. Yet

no sooner had the blood of the 10/7 victims dried than the Oslo delusion was reincarnated in Israel and abroad, with the idea of a West Bank and Gaza Palestinian state ruled by a PLO-dominated 'reformed PA' (a contradiction in terms) flaunted as the panacea to the century-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict: as if it was not the PLO that transformed these territories into terrorist hotbeds that murdered some 2,000 Israelis before 10/7, notably by the 'al-Aqsa Intifada' – a 'slow motion' foretaste of the 10/7 massacres; as if it is was not Arafat who facilitated Hamas's metamorphosis into the terrorist ogre it has become and used it as a central plank of the 'al-Aqsa Intifada'; as if the PLO has not indoctrinated its subjects with unending hatred of Israelis and Jews and has generously remunerated slain and incarcerated terrorists' families; as if PLO terrorists did not brag of participating in the 10/7 massacres and senior PLO/PA officials did not openly pine for the perpetration of similar atrocities in the West Bank; and as if PLO chairman and PA president Mahmoud Abbas did not describe Oslo as 'the biggest mistake Israel ever made', enabling the PLO to get worldwide acceptance and respectability while hanging fast to its genocidal aims.¹⁵⁵

The truth of the matter is that for all their tactical differences and mutual hostility, the PLO and Hamas are warp and woof of the same fabric: genocidal terrorist organisations that are infinitely more interested in the destruction of Israel and the ethnic cleansing of its Jewish population than in the attainment of Palestinian independence. The only difference between them is that the PLO chose to lie its way to this goal by feigning acceptance of the two-state solution to non-Arabic-speaking audiences (but never to its own Palestinian subjects) while Hamas has thus far refused to partake in this charade. This in turn means that any newly-established Palestinian state, whether ruled by the PLO or Hamas, will inevitably be an unreconstructed terrorist entity committed to the 'liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea'. All the more so since it will most likely be ruled by Hamas, which would have long seized control of the West Bank had the corrupt and unpopular PA not been shielded by Israel's counterterrorist activities.

Were such a state to launch a 10/7-style simultaneous invasion from the West Bank and Gaza, hordes of terrorists would be able to roam the more populous streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, among other towns and villages in central and southern Israel, in no time. This will be an assured recipe for catastrophe for both Israel and the Palestinians (or for that matter, for any neighbouring state that will join the attack) that will dwarf the present Gaza conflict into insignificance.

So long as the West Bank and Gaza continue to be governed by the PLO's and Hamas's law of the jungle, there can be no true or lasting reconciliation with Israel, and no Palestinian civil society, let alone a viable state, can develop. Just as the creation of free and democratic societies in Germany and Japan after World War II necessitated a comprehensive sociopolitical

and educational transformation above and beyond the overthrow of the ruling parties, so the West Bank and Gaza must undergo a profound process of de-radicalisation that will sweep the PLO/PA and Hamas from power, eradicate the endemic violence from the Palestinians' political and social life, and teach the virtues of coexistence with their Israeli neighbours. And the first step in this long and tortuous road is the completion of the ongoing Israeli effort to destroy Hamas's military and civilian stranglehold on Gaza. This may not suffice to jumpstart such a monumental change. But absent this, the region is certain to plunge into ever lower depths.

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Notes on contributor

Efraim Karsh is emeritus professor of Middle East and Mediterranean studies at King’s College London and former director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

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