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Israel's eternal dilemma

by Victor Davis Hanson

On October 7 & the Yom Kippur War.

The gruesome massacre of over 1,200 Israelis on Saturday, October 7, 2023, was deliberately timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, a conventional conflict that began when the Israel Defense Forces were similarly surprised on Saturday, October 6, 1973.

The nature of the current conflict—begun by a massive murder spree led by the terrorist gunmen of Hamas—is, of course, quite different from that of the Yom Kippur War. That earlier war broke out with surprise attacks from the armored and air forces of Egypt and Syria, with some additional but marginal support from surrounding Arab nation-states. Moreover, the assaults of 1973 were for the most part aimed at combatants, not civilians, and primarily fought for strategic ground.

In that way, the Yom Kippur War was dissimilar from the October 7 assault on Israeli kibbutz residents and concertgoers. The recent bloodbath of hundreds of civilians was designed by five members of the top terrorist leadership of Hamas in Gaza—the brothers Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Sinwar (both reportedly still alive, hiding in bunkers beneath Gaza), the notorious military commander Mohammed Deif, the Hamas military council grandee Rawhi Mushtaha, and the now-deceased Ayman Nofal, of the so-called Gaza Brigade, who was killed by the

Israelis last October. Their likely aims were to commit unprecedented mass murder on Israeli soil, instill terror among the citizen population, take hostages to mitigate Israeli retaliation, derail ongoing efforts to normalize relations between Israel and moderate Arab regimes, demoralize the West, stir up renewed pro-Hamas protests in the United States and Europe, and by their sheer macabre slaughtering win global awe and even support for their gruesome audacity.

Hamas started the October 7 war with an invading force of a mere 3,000 gunmen, followed by a rag-tag mob of 500 or more civilians, all eager to murder, loot, destroy, and rape unarmed Israeli women, children, and elderly. In comparison, those invading murderers amounted to only a fraction of the million Syrian and Egyptian troops—equipped with over 3,500 tanks and 900 aircraft—that invaded Israel in the first few days of the nineteen-day war of 1973. It is a truism, however, that over the last fifty years it has proven far easier for Arab belligerents to kill en masse unarmed Israeli civilians than to confront the IDF.

Indeed, more Jews were killed and wounded in twenty-four hours by the small Hamas force of terrorists than on any single day since the Holocaust—a death toll of some 1,200 individuals, among them nearly 850 known civilians, alongside 4,834 wounded and 243 taken hostage. By contrast, in the three-week Yom Kippur War—still considered Israel’s costliest and most difficult conflict—the huge conventional forces of Syria and Egypt, together with thousands of auxiliary Arab troops, inflicted somewhere around 2,600 total fatalities, with perhaps 8,000 wounded, and likely took over 290 captives. That is, in just a single day, the 3,000 Hamas terrorists killed and wounded nearly half the number of total casualties inflicted by the huge forces of Egypt and Syria over almost three weeks of nonstop conventional fighting.

The October 7 terrorist assault has nonetheless prompted a months-long war as well, beginning with a conventional military reprisal from the IDF, which about three weeks later entered Gaza and began systematically destroying Hamas’s vast

subterranean city of tunnels. Whatever the disparities between the 1973 invasion of conventional forces and the 2023 murder spree of a few thousand rampaging gunmen, the similarities between the two wars remain both uncanny and instructive.

The early stages of the two conflicts were similar in timing. Fifty years ago, Israel was caught off guard as millions were celebrating the Sabbath during the Yom Kippur holidays. That holiday attack, its Arab enemies reasoned, would ensure surprise and also delay the call-up of reserves—even if the Israelis might have had some notion of the impending invasion in the hours before the assault. Hamas had just that earlier success in mind on October 7.

The Israelis were similarly observing the Sabbath, this time during the Jewish holiday of Shemini Atzeret which follows the week-long celebration of Sukkot, making it difficult to call in reinforcements to the Gaza border, much less mobilize Israeli reserves. It is a trademark of Islamic terrorists to strike during Christian and Jewish religious holidays, perhaps aware that any conventional and reciprocal response timed to Ramadan would be considered blasphemous or somehow unfair and against the so-called rules of war.

The implication of both attacks was that without the advantage of surprise, the Arab enemies of Israel would have faced the full mobilization of the IDF and thus had no chance of inflicting much damage at all on Israel. It is perhaps also a signature of Islamic war against Western powers to seek iconic or anniversary dates, sometimes obscure in the West, that resonate within the larger Muslim community. The 9/11 attack may not have been chosen so much to echo the 911 American emergency phone number as to signal payback for the calamitous defeat of Islamic forces on that very date in 1683, in the final failure of the siege of Vienna. In turn, the fall of the Twin Towers apparently inspired, eleven years later to the day, the attacks on the American consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012.

Intelligence failures have also characterized both wars. These lapses have been committed by all three services—military (Aman), internal security (Shabak/Shin Bet), and foreign (Mossad)—as well as by the respective governments of Golda Meir and the current Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite the half-century interval, there are again commonalities that explain these surprising breakdowns.

Postbellum inquiries found that in 1973, Israelis were still captive to the confidence that followed their incredible victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. In the six years since that stunning success, the Israeli government had felt that its recently acquired territories in Gaza, the Golan Heights, Sinai, and the West Bank had finally given the Jewish state strategic depth—certainly enough room to preclude any further surprise invasions of the pre-1967 borders of Israel.

In addition, the defeat, post-war humiliation, and death in September 1970 of the Egyptian president, the charismatic pan-Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, was thought to have deflated some of the frontline fury against Israel. That sense of demoralization among Israel's enemies only grew the next year on unexpected news from Syria, where a successful coup by the relatively unknown Alawite Hafiz al-Assad had removed and imprisoned the supposedly far more formidable and militant dictator, the Ba'athist general Salah Jadid.

Even more importantly, Israeli intelligence had concluded that the Soviet Union was tiring of arming Arab states in their predictably failed efforts to destroy the Jewish state. The Soviets' weariness seemed confirmed by Assad's own anger at Russian reluctance and his permanent imprisonment of the more loyal Russian client Jadid. In Egypt in July 1972, President Anwar Sadat had reportedly and unexpectedly expelled all Soviet military advisors, in a seemingly bizarre decision to part company with his country's traditional arms supplier. In addition, there were occasional back-channel peace feelers emanating from Cairo to Israel, purportedly with proposals along the lines of regaining Sinai in exchange for the recognition of the Jewish state.

As a result, by late 1972 Israel had concluded that its recently defeated enemies were still in disarray. They appeared orphaned from their traditional military patron in Moscow, no longer viable proxies in the Cold War, and increasingly diminished as threats to Israel's new strategic space—perhaps at last even forced to consider a comprehensive peace. Attention turned instead to the mounting, but supposedly less serious, non-state-sponsored terrorist incursions from the West Bank, organized by the recently formed Palestine Liberation Organization and increasingly under the command of the Fatah leader Yasser Arafat.

While Israel had ostensibly never been stronger, more secure, or more confident than in the fall of 1973, it was also confronted with insidious new dangers and underappreciated responsibilities. The post-1967 additions of the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, the Sinai, and the West Bank had added a vast expanse of some twenty-five thousand square miles of territory under Israeli control—*three times the area within Israel's 1949 borders*. These territories certainly offered security buffers, but they also spread already-taxed IDF forces even thinner on ever-more-distant frontiers, with new responsibilities for governing large Arab populations. The border outposts alone created long external supply lines and increased manpower demands on the tiny, 3.2-million-person Jewish state—another fact not fully appreciated in the exuberant years following the Six-Day War.

In eerily similar fashion, fifty years later, Israel also misunderstood the relatively recent hiatus in Hamas terrorism, wrongly judging the terrorist threat from Gaza as increasingly somnolent. Moreover, the government considered the violently terroristic Hamas a more authentic representative of the Palestinians, with more grassroots support, than the traditionally more powerful Palestinian Authority. Therefore, Israel in counterintuitive fashion directed more of its own support to the militant Gazan leadership. Few in the intelligence services or the government fully grasped the dangers of normalizing in any fashion the murderous Hamas, whose various charters still call for the extermination of the Jewish state.

As part of this dangerous normalization, kibbutzes along the Gaza border increasingly invited in day laborers from Gaza, who eventually numbered nearly twenty thousand (some 13 percent of all Palestinian workers inside Israel). Wages were roughly comparable to those accorded Israeli day laborers, and four times higher than in Gaza itself.

Many Israelis wrongly assumed the ensuing prosperity and familiarity would lessen tensions on the border, rather than provide Hamas with vital intelligence on the security, armament, and numbers of Israeli kibbutzes and towns facing the Gaza Strip. More importantly, there was scant evidence from similar past efforts that Palestinians witnessing firsthand Israeli accomplishment and affluence would embrace a desire for emulation, rather than feel envy for, and even hatred of, their success.

Still, long before the October 7 massacre, there was skepticism about the real intentions of the Hamas rapprochement—as outlined, for example, in a pessimistic May 2021 column in *The Jerusalem Post*:

Historians may agree that it is still too early to evaluate the results of the recent events in Israel and Gaza, but our limited historical perspective might suggest that several Israeli wide-held conceptions have been shattered. The first relates to Israel's intelligence assessment that Hamas is not interested in escalating its struggle against Israel and is focused on its domestic concerns.

Unfortunately, despite such large-scale skepticism that Hamas could ever be reformed, the rosy intelligence assessments prevailed. On the eve of the October 7 massacre, the Jewish state had never seemed more prosperous, secure, and yet apparently factious. For example, the largest protests in Israeli history erupted for months during 2023 over the Netanyahu government's proposed reforms of the Israeli Supreme Court. Amid demonstrations that shocked and delighted Arab neighbors, reports circulated that some IDF reservists had refused normal service call-ups in further protest.

Israel recently became a net exporter of natural gas from its vast and newly developed offshore fields. Its per capita GDP has soared, and by 2023 was equivalent to levels in France and the United Kingdom. Five vast desalination plants provide Israel with over three-quarters of its potable water. Before the war, there was talk of further joint ventures and United Nations–funded efforts to increase the desalinated water supplies being sent to the West Bank and Gaza. And there were still hopes—despite vetoes by the Biden administration, to the delight of Turkey—of rebooting the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline project, in which Israel, Greece, and Cyprus would jointly develop and transport Mediterranean natural gas into southern Europe.

In sum, among some influential Israelis there prevailed a sort of end-of-history illusion that their amazing prosperity might at last solve the perennial Palestinian question via an osmosis of affluence. In the diplomatic sphere, there seems in retrospect to have been a similar naive optimism. The Biden administration’s misguided effort to resurrect the Obama-era Iran deal had failed, to the relief of Israelis. Moreover, Biden’s rejection of the Trump-brokered Abraham Accords was gradually being rebooted into open (if opportunistic) support for and a restarting of talks to promote normalization between Israel and the Gulf kingdoms—with long-awaited hints of new overtures from the Saudis.

If Israel made disastrously unrealistic appraisals of the capabilities and intentions of Hamas, and entertained equally misguided notions that its own startling success and wealth were diminishing the attractions of terrorism for Palestinians, the United States itself, in quite different ways, was also losing its means of deterrence in the Middle East. And that reality was widely appreciated—and fueled—by Iran and its satellites, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis of Yemen.

The Biden administration obsequiously but in vain sought to rekindle the Iran deal. It inexplicably lifted oil sanctions on Tehran, resulting in an influx of somewhere between \$60 and \$90 billion in petroleum revenues there since the departure of Trump. The new administration was on record in seeking to route \$1.2 billion *each*

for the releases of the six American hostages held in Iran. Biden restored financial aid to both the West Bank and Gaza. He dropped the terrorist designation for the Houthis in Yemen. His diplomatic team was openly critical of the Netanyahu government and made no effort to disguise its own preference for a liberal alternative that would better accommodate Palestinian agendas.

This sense of eagerness to appease the non-Israeli Middle East was coupled with a loss of U.S. strategic deterrence in general. The massive American collapse in and flight from Afghanistan of August 2021—with a multibillion-dollar trove of weapons abandoned to the Taliban—sent encouraging signals to an array of American enemies. And these enemies' later perception that a near historically unpopular Biden either could not or would not do much about the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was reinforced by the late January 2023 weeklong flight of a Chinese espionage balloon across the continental United States with impunity.

In the wake of the October 7 attack, the failures of U.S. deterrence have become even more plain. There has been constant rocketing of U.S. military installations in Syria and Iraq by Iranian-allied terrorists. The Houthis have repaid the Biden delisting of them as terrorists by stepping up drone and rocket attacks in the Red Sea. In sum, all these aggressions and catastrophes have contributed to the sense that the United States is in no position to deter its own enemies, much less those of its allies.

The same had been true in October 1973—on the eve of, during, and immediately after the Yom Kippur War—as similar doubts arose about both the reliability and the capability of the United States as Israel's patron. Chronic left-wing domestic terrorism continued throughout 1972–73 and peaked in September of the latter year with the Weather Underground's bombing of the ITT headquarters in New York and Rome. Massive demonstrations broke out over the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, adding to the persistent anti-war protests.

Indeed, in early 1973 Vietnam still dominated the nightly news, as the administration gave a series of concessions to the North Vietnamese to ensure the return of American prisoners of war and to bring an end to American participation in the decades-long misadventure. The media exposed the supposedly illegal American bombing of Cambodia that by August was forced to cease, ensuring the communist takeover of that country, which soon ended in genocide.

All summer long, with congressional hearings aired daily on national television, the conundrum of Watergate weakened the Nixon administration's credibility abroad and ability to govern at home. By the late spring of 1973, Nixon had fired his two top White House aides, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, following the forced resignation of White House Counsel John Dean. The latter had flipped to a prosecution witness, even as Attorney General Richard Kleindienst was also forced to step down.

Amid the executive-branch turmoil, by early autumn the House was heading toward a likely impeachment of President Nixon, as executive–legislative debates broke out over revelations of the White House's secret system for recording presidential phone calls—including confidential conversations with foreign leaders. On the last day of the war, October 25, Nixon fired the special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox in the so-called Saturday Night Massacre that for weeks turned attention from abroad to Beltway melodramas, further undermining American stability and resolve overseas.

During the entire course of the three-week conflict, a distracted Nixon was still further crippled by related spinoff scandals. On October 10, just four days after the surprise attack on Israel, Nixon's vice president Spiro Agnew had abruptly resigned after pleading *nolo contendere* to a single, negotiated tax-fraud charge. Meanwhile, earlier rumors of a looming oil embargo were soon confirmed. The ban shocked into recession the economies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and a few states in Europe that also had supported Israel. The threats of boycotts by the

Gulf exporters, coupled with the OPEC cartel's curtailment of production, became a Sword of Damocles hung over American diplomatic efforts in the Middle East for decades.

There are still other commonalities between the two wars. One has to do with Israel's overconfidence in its own technological superiority and the tendency to underestimate the wherewithal, persistence, and tactical capabilities of its enemies. In 1973, the departure of Russian advisors from Egypt seemed to confirm to the Israelis that Arab nations had lost access to the most sophisticated Soviet weapons, which were themselves purportedly not as lethal as Israel's American-supplied munitions.

In fact, aside from providing critical satellite intelligence, the Soviets continued to supply the Sadat government with their most advanced weapons systems—even as the Egyptians used a sophisticated disinformation campaign to concoct a mythical Arab–Soviet falling-out, with the false narrative that by expelling Soviet advisors Egypt preferred to be orphaned but autonomous. In short, prior to their invasions, the Arabs postured as poorly armed but principled independent actors, rather than continually obedient Russian clients and stealthy recipients of uninterrupted Soviet largesse.

The result was that when the October 6 war broke out, the Egyptians achieved stunning initial successes not just through surprise, but also due to the use of massive stockpiles of lethal and often underappreciated Soviet weaponry. Wire-guided 9M14 Malyutka (or “AT-3 Sagger”) anti-tank rockets, SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missile batteries, and deadly shoulder-fired SA-6 and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles took a terrible toll on Israeli armor and aircraft in the first hours of the conflict.

Soviet-supplied, agile, and highly maneuverable MiG-21S jets, in the hands of skilled pilots, could achieve parity with the heavier and larger American F-4 Phantoms, the frontline workhorse of the Israeli Air Force, especially since Israeli planes were

vulnerable anytime they entered airspace protected by Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries. Similarly, Soviet T-55 and T-62 heavy tanks were in terms of firepower and armor roughly equivalent to American-supplied M-48 and M-60 Pattons.

So, having assumed that their Egyptian and Syrian enemies would be poorly equipped after their supposed alienation from the Soviets, the Israelis were shocked to discover that in truth the Arabs were quite well supplied with state-of-the-art Cold War munitions. Vastly better-trained Israeli pilots and tank crews, and superior command-and-control adaptability within the first week of the war, soon enabled the IDF to adjust to both the surprise attack and the effective use of Soviet weaponry. But Israelis acknowledged afterward that the Arab armies in the first days of the conflict had proved formidable in ways far beyond their wildest expectations.

Similarly, before October 7 Israeli intelligence agencies and the IDF knew fairly well that Hamas had a labyrinth of tunnels in Gaza and had been supplied by Iran with sophisticated surface-to-surface missiles far more lethal than their own stockpiles of often homemade rockets. Hamas also was known to have been adept in avoiding Israeli surveillance and detection. But apparently no one in the Israeli intelligence communities had fully anticipated the wiliness of Hamas in communicating over walkie-talkies, employing World War I-like ground messengers to deliver handwritten messages, jamming Israeli border-security technology, and for months keeping their highest echelon off the internet and away from cell-phone communications. As a result of their yearslong planning, Hamas operatives were able to traverse the Middle East from Qatar to Beirut to Tehran largely unnoticed or at least unappreciated.

Iranian- and Chinese-designed Ayyash-250, R-160, Fajr-5, and Badr-3 missiles were also available to Hamas. Their range and payloads vastly exceeded those of the indigenously produced Qassam rockets. It wasn't until Israel entered Gaza during its response to the October 7 massacre that the IDF finally appreciated the vast, three-hundred-mile subterranean Hamas city, the sheer size of the tunnels, and the ubiquity of its exits and entrances under mosques, schools, and hospitals—a

multibillion-dollar diversion of international aid that had created a veritable military city far underground, complete with electrical power, heating and cooling, and water and sewage systems, and in places wide enough for vehicular traffic.

Only after October 27, when operations exploring the tunnels in Gaza began, did Israel truly begin to understand the magnitude of the labor, capital, and time invested in such a cavernous military complex, the product of imported tunnel-boring equipment, reinforced precast concrete conduits, and sophisticated engineering. And just as the Israelis had failed to anticipate the Egyptian military's ingenuity in its surprise bridging of the Suez Canal and its employment of water cannons to blast apart a sixty-foot sand wall blocking entry into Sinai, so too did they not imagine that Hamas would ever sail over the Gaza wall with gunmen flying in paragliders.

The Israeli border wall with Gaza was postmodern—at least in the sense that its sophisticated, sensor-equipped, billion-dollar surveillance technology purportedly made the old idea of a series of massive, reinforced concrete and steel walls anachronistic. But in truth, after more than a year of planning, Hamas proved adept in jamming the border wall's electronics, and on October 7 it used explosives and land-moving equipment to punch huge holes in the barrier itself. In retrospect, something like the old brick-and-mortar Theodosian Walls of Constantinople, which date to the fifth century A.D., would have been far more likely to prevent the Hamas invasion.

In addition, the very pulse of the war in Gaza is akin to the progression of events in the Yom Kippur War: initial Israeli unpreparedness, Middle Eastern euphoria over the early Arab Muslim victories and the losses by its enemies, rapid Israeli recalibration and response, and, within days, counteroffensive measures that took an enormous toll on the invaders, infuriated the Middle East, prompted global calls for “proportionality” and a cease-fire, and saw mounting pressure on the United States to restrain its resurgent client.

A related, obvious subtext to the courses of the 1973 and 2023 wars was that the Israel Defense Forces, even when surprised, were fully capable of both defeating their immediate aggressors and deterring the legions of surrounding enemies considering opportunistic entries into the war. The only real difference in the outcomes of the two conflicts has been that Egypt justified ex post facto the great cost of the 1973 surprise attack by the subsequent return of the thousands of square miles of occupied territory that was lost in the 1967 war. So far, Hamas cannot claim that any territorial gain or strategic advantage has resulted from its October 7 surprise attack.

As for the professed reasons for Hamas's October 7 attack, all were bankrupt: there was zero chance its mass murdering would lead to the dismantlement of the Jewish state; its surprise assault will not permanently prevent more moderate Arab states from eventually coming to some sort of accord with Israel. Israel itself did not, as alleged, desecrate or seek to harm the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem; and the horrific Hamas killing, coupled with the defeat and humiliation of the Hamas terrorists, so far has not prompted a new pan-Arab intifada, or even a wider Middle East conflict with Hezbollah and Iran.

Both the 1973 and the 2023 wars, like most Israeli–Arab conflicts, have also served as proxies of a sort. Given the heavy reliance of Israel on American resupply of its arms and the ability of the United States to prevent the Soviet Union and, a half-century later, Iran and other outside powers from intervening on behalf of its Arab enemies, both the Nixon and Biden administrations respectively felt that they had earned the right to restrain Israel's military responses in a manner vaguely dubbed “proportionate.”

That is, after Israel had received grievous shocks from costly surprise attacks, the United States naturally sought to manage subsequent Israeli retaliations in ways that did not injure its own perceived global interests—especially in the context of not permanently alienating the rich, oil-exporting (and occasionally terrorist-exporting) Arab and Islamic Middle Eastern petrostates.

Controversy still swirls around the purported wartime efforts of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to slow-walk the resupply of vital planes and armor for a few days, until Israel digested the message that the Yom Kippur War, unlike the 1967 Six-Day War, would not end with the complete defeat and utter humiliation of Israel's neighbors. For the Nixon administration, it was largely immaterial that Israel's enemies had prompted the war with surprise attacks, that the United States in 1973 had prevented a last-minute preemptive Israeli strike that would have saved Jewish lives, and that without the complete defeat and degradation of its enemies' means of waging war, Israeli deterrence would always be ephemeral (indeed, such restraint only enabled the serial wars to come). To be fair, however, the Nixon–Kissinger effort did lead to the Camp David Accords, the recognition of Israel by Egypt, and the subsequent fifty years of peace between the two states, even as the wider Middle East remained in violent turmoil.

Broader concerns about ensuring reliable and affordable petroleum exports to the West from the Middle East, flipping former Soviet Arab dependencies into American clients, finding a permanent peace that would stop radical Palestinian and Islamic global terrorism, and keeping Russia out of the Middle East for good were of far greater importance for American diplomats. And such agendas often did not synchronize with Israeli interests.

The same scenario played out in 2023. Initially, the Biden administration expressed outrage over the Hamas massacres through both public declarations of sympathy and tacit acceptance of a strong Israeli response. Soon, however, the administration began to worry about “inordinate” or “disproportionate” Israeli reprisals, in reaction to international criticism over the severity of the Israeli bombing in Gaza. At home, large pro-Hamas rallies in swing states like Michigan and Pennsylvania rattled the Biden administration—who feared that, in states projected to have such tight election races in 2024, even a small defection of traditionally Democratic Arab American voters could lose Biden the election.

By the end of the second month of the Israeli counterattacks on Hamas, overt American strong-arming had sought to force a cease-fire. When Hamas lied about purported strikes on Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (it was hit by an errant Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket aimed at Israeli civilian centers) or released exaggerated fatality figures (unverified and without distinguishing Hamas terrorist fatalities from those of the shielding civilian population), furor mounted abroad in the Middle East, at the United Nations, and among the European Union nations, prompting even greater U.S. pressure on Israel to agree to a permanent cease-fire.

That paradigm of U.S. pressure on Israel to deescalate was established back in 1973, when Israel became almost fully dependent on U.S. arms during the Yom Kippur War. After the initial Israeli defeats and rapid equipment losses, the Nixon administration began a massive resupply operation. Initially, the Soviet Union did not extend more military aid to the Arabs, privately expressing little confidence in an ultimate Arab victory. But within hours of what seemed to be a successful surprise attack that had evidently flummoxed both Israel and the United States, Moscow began airlifting resupplies to the Egyptian and Syrian militaries. Oddly, the Soviets enjoyed free use of NATO members' European airspace that was often denied to the United States—a fellow NATO member, no less—in its efforts to match Russian efforts plane for plane and tank for tank.

Soon, when its Arab proxies faced near-annihilation at the end of the first two weeks of the conflict, Moscow began overtly threatening the United States into further restraining Israel. That interference finally prompted Nixon, near the end of the war, to raise the military alert for all U.S. forces around the world to DEFCON 3—the highest stage of American peacetime readiness and just two steps from nuclear war. Nixon felt that he had deterred the Soviet Union, forced a cease-fire somewhat favorable to Israel, and yet opened a path for the defeated Arab frontline states to claim “victory” through their initial progress—thus paving, at least in the case of Jordan and Egypt, the way for a lasting peace settlement.

What ensued in the days after the cease-fire of October 25, 1973, was the virtual appropriation of the strategic course of the war by the Soviet Union and the United States. Both pressured their respective proxies to cease hostilities, largely on the mutual agreement that it was not a good thing for either Israel or Egypt that the trapped Egyptian Third Army be obliterated by the IDF.

As we witnessed in 2023, nothing in these half-century-long proxy wars truly changed the Israeli–American client–patron relationship. The mutual understanding seems still to rest on a series of quid pro quos:

- 1) The United States ensures that Israel has superior weapons and resupply, but only if it follows American strategic mandates.
- 2) The United States discourages preemptive attacks by the Jewish state, even when it is likely that major conventional or terrorist attacks are looming and preemption might quash them.
- 3) The United States seeks to prevent outside major powers from intervening against Israel on behalf of its failing Arab opponents.
- 4) The United States modulates the intensity of Israeli retaliatory offensive operations to prevent an unconditional victory, thereby not alienating the five-hundred-million-person Middle East from the United States.

For Israel, the domestic outcomes of these surprise-attack Middle East wars also follow a predictable script. The Israeli government in power is immediately faulted for being caught unaware, despite the general failure of all of Israel's intelligence services. A shocked and angry Israeli public unites and delays its criticism until the existing government has recovered and defeated the enemy. The Netanyahu administration, like the Meir administration fifty years ago, brought in a wartime

coalition government including members from the opposition—but with the expectation that after the existential threat had passed and Israel had prevailed, the government would call an election.

In sum, the more things have changed in the twenty-first century, the more they remain the same as the status quo of the twentieth. What, then, are we to make of this long, depressing cycle of warring that predates even the Yom Kippur War and will likely continue well beyond the current war in Gaza?

Israel in its current strategy seeks to reaffirm that whenever it is attacked, it will achieve an unconditional victory over the aggressor—at least to such a degree as to deter any other enemy from joining the anti-Israeli coalition, and ideally to ensure that no enemy will ever consider such a surprise attack again. Achieving such deterrence, however, would require the United States to forewarn state enemies of Israel that any preemptive attack on the Jewish state will earn a response from it whose magnitude and duration will be left entirely up to Jerusalem—while the United States would deter any great or regional power from opportunistically entering the conflict.

Yet Israel cannot count on such unconditional U.S. support, even after brutal surprise Arab attacks. The reasons for such caution are not just the radical ideological and demographic changes within the United States, brought about by open borders and massive immigration; the fundamental transformation of a once-liberal Democratic Party into a neo-socialist, anti-Semitic force; and the replacement of classical liberalism on American campuses by woke loathing, stoked by DEI functionaries, of Western civilization in general and Israel in particular.

More fundamentally, the actual national interests of the United States and Israel will not always coincide, especially in an era when the traditional economic and military superiority of America is increasingly in doubt abroad, and in compensation Washington seeks new allies and partnerships—and compromises—in lieu of its once unquestioned confidence and power.

As far as Israel goes, Jerusalem should invest in far greater domestic weapons capability. It must stockpile far more arms. And it has to accept the reality that it is a permanent garrison state, an outnumbered, Byzantium-like Western outpost in a hostile East surrounded by a sea of enemies. It cannot, like similar affluent Western democracies, afford flights of ecumenical, utopian, and pacifist fancy. It cannot even safely indulge itself in massive internal protests—not when surrounded by hostile forces pledged to its destruction and ceaselessly looking to exploit the slightest sign of domestic turmoil amid Western laxity.

As in the thousand-year history of Constantinople, Israel's increased prosperity, stability, and confidence have only instilled greater hatred among its Islamic neighbors, for achieving results that remain impossible in their own countries until they seek changes to their politics, economy, culture, and religious practices—agendas that for the near future remain unlikely, given that the proverbial medicine is still deemed more toxic than the disease itself. Israel should also attempt to cultivate allies well beyond the United States. After all, Constantinople after a millennium eventually fell in 1453, but only after it was abandoned by its major Western European allies that had still expressed admiration and empathy for its dogged resistance—but not to the extent of risking to send help in its final hour of need.

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