

The New Israel, and the Old

Citizens of the Jewish state must recover the single-minded attention to security that typified their country's early days.

What has been, will not be again.”

Via prolific social-media posting, the Jewish state's typically ebullient minister of infrastructure, Israel Katz, attempted to turn these words into a war slogan in the early days of the new Middle East war. This war would not merely be about degrading Hamas but completely defeating the organization, militarily and politically. Regarding the nature of the conflict that began with Hamas's savage attacks on October 7, the two sides were somewhat in agreement. Hamas's representative in Lebanon, Ahmad Abd Al-Hadi, told a Lebanese interviewer that “this is not the final battle for the liberation, which landed a blow against [Israel's normalization process with the Arab world]. . . . What happened before will not be the same after this operation.”

By any assessment, Israel has entered an uncertain future. All participants, as well as outside observers, see it. Yet no one can confidently predict what lies ahead, given the volatility of the war. Thus far, Israel, with assistance and encouragement from United States naval assets in the eastern Mediterranean, has mostly limited the conflict to a war with the Hamas government of Gaza. Yet actors in Tehran, Beirut, Yemen, and elsewhere may yet have their say.

While Benjamin Netanyahu's government has so far struggled to articulate a political aim for the war beyond the military destruction of Hamas, Israelis sense, on some level, that this is a struggle for the survival of the state. Israel's former consul general in New York, Assaf Zamir, who resigned in protest from his post in March over the Netanyahu government's judicial-reform plan, captured this sentiment in a recent X post:

If this war ends without it being completely safe to return to live on the border of Lebanon, and around Gaza, and if it's impossible to return and hold festivals and events in the entire country without any fear, we lost. Not the war, the country. Want to know what the goals of the war are? These are the goals of the war. No less. Otherwise it's over. Maybe slowly, but over.

Over the past few decades, Israel underwent a remarkable transformation, growing much more politically powerful, economically richer, and seemingly more secure in the region. Along the way, even as Hamas

solidified its control in Gaza and Iran continued its path toward nuclear weapons and regional domination, Israelis began, little by little, to convince themselves that they could live mostly normal lives. If Israel was once the “New Sparta” (in the words of French historian François Furet) because of its single-minded focus on security and the martial virtues necessary to guarantee it, it had recently come more and more to resemble a middle-class liberal democracy, albeit with its own special characteristics. After 10/7, everything will be different. Israel’s holiday from history is over. And the country will have to rediscover the single-minded attention to security that typified its early days.

Since the end of the Second Lebanon War (2006), Israel had enjoyed a run of relative safety and stability, unlike any period in its history—perhaps including the early Zionist settlements in Palestine in the 1880s. The suicide terror that had tested the social fabric during the 1990s and especially during the Second Intifada (2000–05), when thousands of Israelis were killed or injured, largely tapered off, despite occasional flare-ups. In the West Bank and, above all, in Gaza, the terror threat seemed to be “in a box,” with violence met by the Israeli strategy of “mowing the grass”—killing a certain number of Hamas fighters and taking out infrastructure while avoiding the risks involved in trying to destroy the Hamas regime.

All through this period, the Israeli economy grew at a seemingly unstoppable rate, typically above 5 percent per year, even in bad years. When Israel turned 75 in 2023, many Israelis agreed with Prime Minister Netanyahu’s claim that the country had become an “indispensable partner” because of its rising power. The Abraham Accords, which saw Israel normalize relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, seemed to confirm Israel’s stature and its acceptance in the Middle East. A recent geopolitical title in Hebrew, *How Israel Became an Empire*, expressed a popular opinion about the Jewish state’s rising fortunes. We now see such claims as laden with hubris, but they also expressed an undeniable reality: Israeli power had increased dramatically over the last generation.

It was a phenomenon as rapid as it was unexpected. During the Second Intifada, many intelligent observers wondered whether the state could weather overlapping security, demographic, and economic crises. When I came to Jerusalem for my first several-years-long stint, in 2006, a series of national traumas had battered the country. The Oslo Accords and mainstream Israel’s dream of normalcy had crashed in the Intifada, which dealt the Israeli Left a blow from which it has yet to recover. In response to the Intifada, Ariel Sharon led a costly but successful reassertion of Israeli military control over the West Bank. Sharon subsequently enacted the unilateral “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005, calling on Israeli troops to remove some of the 7,000 Jewish settlers there who had refused the order to leave. The following year, Hamas forcibly asserted itself as the government of Gaza, where it has ruled ever since.

The Second Lebanon War was a national trauma all its own. The 32-day conflict saw Israel launch a ground incursion into southern Lebanon in response to Hezbollah’s murder of three soldiers and rocket fire on northern Israel. Judged a “bloody stalemate” by foreign observers, the war was widely regarded as a failure

in Israel due to high military casualties (more than 100 killed and more than 1,000 wounded), as well as Hezbollah's further military and political entrenchment in Lebanon.

Israelis were in a surly mood after that war. War-veteran students from Hebrew University frequently excused themselves from class to join weekly protests against the government, outside the prime minister's residence. Public anger over the war's mismanagement melded with a sense that the state had reached a political impasse. The peace process seemed dead, despite one final attempt by Ehud Olmert to conclude a two-state solution in 2008—rebuffed by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, to no one's surprise. Where would Israel go from here?

Quickly, though, the national mood improved. Sharon had succeeded in dismantling the terror networks in the cities and towns of the West Bank, and the military and intelligence infrastructure that he put into place led to an at-first gradual, and then swift, decline in terrorism. Despite the public's negative view of the war, it soon became clear that Israel's incursion had restored deterrence in the north. Hezbollah rebuilt and improved its arsenal, but it would now confine its actions to occasional border skirmishes, rather than the large-scale missile barrages of the Lebanon War.

A broad consensus emerged during these years that the Palestinian conflict could be managed or contained, rather than solved. When Netanyahu's Likud was elected in 2009, he adopted a policy of containment that persisted all the way until this past October 7. Its key elements were status quo on the diplomatic front, neither moving toward annexation nor toward a two-state solution; limited small wars in Gaza, in response to Hamas atrocities and missile barrages, but no ground incursions; and efforts to uplift the West Bank and Israeli Arabs economically, giving Arabs on both sides of the 1967 Green Line a stake in the success of the Jewish state—or at least an incentive not to rock the boat.

Meantime, Israel would pursue more active diplomacy in its near-abroad, a revival of the 1950s “periphery strategy.” It would focus on warming relations with Arab states worried about the rise of Iranian power and eager to benefit from Tel Aviv's expanding military and technological prowess. In the months leading up to the October 7 attacks, Israel seemed on the verge of widening the Arab accords to include Saudi Arabia—the biggest breakthrough yet. The prospect of normalization with Saudi Arabia, the leading Arab power and caretaker of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, led even the most pessimistic observers to hope that the Arab–Israeli conflict might be nearing an end—though the Iranian threat remained. Belying his hardline reputation abroad, Netanyahu chose covert war, alliance building, and deterrence. A formal Israel–Saudi alliance seemed the strongest possible deterrent against Iran's revolutionary ambitions.

The glaring weakness in Israel's upward trajectory was its dysfunctional political system, which, especially from 2015 onward, produced weak, incoherent governments of short duration, and which began to elevate fanatics or incompetents to positions of responsibility (the demagogic Itamar Ben-Gvir, with a small electoral constituency but a large megaphone, being the latest and gravest example). Netanyahu assured

Israelis and foreigners that his steady hands remained on the wheel. And though he was an intensely polarizing figure in his own right, his political approach—stability with the Palestinians, technological and economic liberalization, and regional integration—aligned with the wishes of a clear majority of Israelis. His bafflingly imprudent foray into a divisive judicial-reform agenda this past year ruptured the broad consensus that Netanyahu had somehow held together over his almost 14 years as prime minister. But until recently, Israelis were confident that the country was still rolling along, whatever the weakness of its governing institutions.

Climbing political fortunes and rising standards of living left their mark on Israeli society and culture in profound ways. In 2006, a broke graduate student could dream about one day affording a modest apartment in a hip neighborhood, like Tel Aviv's Neve Tzedek, or in Jerusalem's leafy Rehavia. Just a few years later, such habitations were exclusively the domain of French tech entrepreneurs or American diamond merchants. Shabbily charming Tel Aviv, other than a few small quarters reminiscent of lesser California suburbs, got comfortable, and even ritzy, at breakneck speed. The city's old rough-hewn core, with streets by the seaside dating back to the British Mandate, were displaced by a new center farther to the east, which boasted skyscrapers and ambitious residential and commercial developments that call to mind Newport Beach or Dubai. Even Jerusalem, long poor and seriously undeveloped, compared with the country's coastal plan, and a haven for students religious and secular, became far more bourgeois and middle class—partly thanks to a heavy influx of Americans and Western Europeans.

Though still suffering some discrimination, Israeli Arabs improved their fortunes dramatically during these years. A friend who teaches at Tel Aviv University reports that, for the first time, he is unable to discern the national origin of his students—a testament to Arabs' increasing assimilation. Dreams of perfect coexistence frequently crashed against the reality of tensions, but the broader development of a new Arab middle class persisted—a phenomenon that found its expression in the political career of Mansour Abbas, leader of the first Arab political party to make its peace with Zionism. A late October poll indicating that 70 percent of Israeli Arabs identify with the state suggests that this trend may be accelerating post-October 7. For Israel aspires to, though sometimes fails to live up to, the idea of equal rights for all, regardless of religion, sex, or creed. Like all other Israelis, Israeli Arabs saw firsthand how Hamas rejoiced in its butchery regardless of its victims' religion, sex, or creed.

New economic opportunities rapidly reshaped mores, too. Since the creation of the air force, the fighter pilot has stood at the pinnacle of Israel's social pecking order—just above soldiers from elite combat units. While combat prestige hadn't totally evaporated, it was challenged on multiple fronts, especially by tech "start-upists," who make their fortunes by attracting foreign venture capital. The prestige of military intelligence grew, but emphasis shifted to how its technologies could apply in the private sector. As recently as the early 2000s, the military could count on some of the country's best and brightest choosing careers in the IDF. Declining standards in the general staff and other military departments are perhaps best not discussed too openly in wartime. And, through the first part of the war, the IDF, at the operational

level, has shown plenty of the ingenuity, bravery, and intelligence for which it has long been recognized. Still, the state will have to figure out how the army can again attract the sharpest strategic and tactical minds, who, over recent decades, have been lured away by tech.

Over the past few years, people's expectations between war and peace have subtly shifted. Whereas peace was once seen as a cherished break from constant war, it came to be seen as a norm, with war the temporary deviation. "We lived through the hard years—now we ought to enjoy ourselves." I heard variations on this refrain from many Israelis, even as it was often accompanied by complaints about the rising costs of living. Meantime, a newly emboldened political Right developed ambitious and utopian dreams of transforming the country culturally, demographically, and politically—if only the Supreme Court and the left-leaning bureaucrats in state institutions could be taken down a notch. Certain right-wing arguments against judicial overreach and unchecked bureaucratic power had force. But in seeking to transform the country in this way, Israel's new Right had forgotten David Ben-Gurion's warning against privileging culture war over the preparation for actual war: "If we begin to engage in major [national] philosophic arguments, we will damage the essential needs of the state," he told parliamentary colleagues in an important 1949 speech. National security concerns always had to be front of mind, he said. As Israelis had forgotten, this logic holds up almost as much now as it did in 1949.



“If we begin to engage in major [national] philosophic arguments, we will damage the essential needs of the state,” David Ben-Gurion warned in 1949. (David Eldan/GPO/Getty Images)

Not all the facets of the “new Israel” will have to give way in response to a potentially long-lasting military crucible. But some old habits will have to be relearned. Just as we see Russia and Ukraine altering fundamental features of their political and social life to meet the demands of war, so, too, Israel will have to steel itself, again, to living on potentially near-permanent war footing. Cross-partisan pressure on finance minister Bezalel Smotrich to cut welfare subsidies—including the always politically radioactive issue of state stipends for religious yeshiva students—already have begun to mount in the first months of the war. Potentially major changes are simmering within ultra-Orthodox communities themselves. The chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel has made much-publicized visits to war fronts near Gaza and in the North, a sign of the community’s growing recognition of the Zionist project—and all that it entails. The instances of ultra-Orthodox Jews choosing to serve in the military had been creeping up slowly over the last decade. In the first days of the war, interest skyrocketed, with just over 2,000 agreeing to volunteer within weeks of the outbreak of combat. Survey data on these ultra-Orthodox communities, famously lukewarm on Zionism in the past, revealed that 68 percent thought it important to contribute to the future of the Jewish state.

“What has been, will not be again.” Israelis have again seen, through terrible tragedy, that threats to the existence of the Jewish state are not a relic of the past. It is understandable that Israelis enjoyed the period of relative stability that has now passed, even as hard questions must be asked about how the country let its guard down. But if Israelis hope someday to devote themselves again to the art of peace, they must now gird themselves for a long period of war.

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Top Photo: Victims of Hamas’s October 7 massacre (Ziv Koren/Polaris/Newscom)

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