

# What Israel Wants

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 12.09.2025

The events of October 7, 2023, shook Israel to its core. Hamas's brutal attack—which left some 1,200 dead and hundreds more held captive—made clear to Israel's leaders and citizens alike that the country must change its approach to national security to ensure its survival. For many Israelis, October 7 demonstrated that it is impossible to contain groups such as Hamas or to accept their existence along Israel's borders without compromising the country's safety. In the subsequent two years, Israeli decision-makers have discarded old security paradigms in favor of new strategies. Although Israel has long had the strongest military in the region and has fought conflicts beyond its borders, it had generally sought to limit its actions to the minimum necessary to remove immediate threats and restore quiet. Today, however, Israel is no longer content with weakening, rather than defeating, its adversaries. Instead, Israeli leaders are much more willing to employ the country's military strength to proactively shape a new order that protects its national interests.

Despite opposition from some of Israel's traditional elites, including some former security officials, Israel's actions across the region since October 7 demonstrate that these new strategies are taking root. In addition to continuing its ground war in Gaza, Israel launched a campaign to degrade Tehran's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities and assassinate many senior security officials and nuclear scientists. Israel also struck targets in Lebanon to prevent the rearmament of Hezbollah, established a military presence in Syria, intervened directly in support of the Druze community against forces aligned with the Syrian regime, and conducted an airstrike aimed at Hamas officials in Qatar.

Israel's targeted killings of senior leaders in Iran, Lebanon, Qatar, and elsewhere show that Israel no longer adheres to redlines that its neighbors believed it would never cross. Israel will not grant immunity to any leaders of hostile groups, no matter their political title or location, if Israel believes they are involved in terrorist activity. In the past, Israel would generally have carried out these actions in a low-profile manner or tried to hide its role in them, but now its leaders openly embrace these moves.

Some have interpreted Israel's new strategy as a quest for regional hegemony. In reality, although it is the strongest military power in the region, Israel is not a

regional hegemon—nor does it seek to be one. The Israeli economy does not represent a disproportionate share of regional GDP, nor can Israel unilaterally shape economic arrangements in the region to its benefit. Israel, with few natural allies in the region, also enjoys relatively little soft power among its neighbors.

Israel does not want to dominate the regional order. But it does seek to shape that order to a greater degree than ever before. This includes defending its assets and allies, holding territory and adjusting borders when strategically necessary, forging diverse alliances around common interests, and preventing any potential enemy from developing capabilities that would threaten its existence or security. Israel is willing to establish war goals that are far more ambitious than the ones it has pursued in the past, even if achieving those goals is costly and requires sustained or multifront military action.

An increasing number of decision-makers in the Israeli government, along with outside analysts (including both of us), believe that this strategy is more likely to stabilize the region and ensure Israel's security than past strategies, which relied primarily on deterrence. Israel must avoid security concessions based on visions of peace that overlook the hatred of Israel and extremist views that have taken root among the Palestinians and other Arab populations. Israel should not exchange concrete and substantive victories on the ground for questionable diplomatic promises with unreliable partners. Any peace negotiations must start from an understanding of Israel's security concerns and a willingness to accommodate the necessary arrangements to allay them.

Israeli leaders today believe that the country's attractiveness as a diplomatic partner and ally stems from its strength. Concessions on core interests only diminish Israel's value as a regional ally: as soon as Israel suggests a compromise for peace, countries hostile to Israel see it as evidence that the country will buckle under pressure. Tellingly, Arab countries that normalized relations with Israel as part of the 2020 Abraham Accords have continued to partner with the country on diplomacy, defense, and trade after October 7 because of the benefits of cooperating with a strong Israel.

The ultimate test of this strategy will be the war in Gaza. Although Israel's determination to eliminate Hamas has been costly—its actions have destroyed Gazan infrastructure and led to the deaths of many, both combatants and civilians—the goal is critical to Israel's future, and the approach is thus

necessary. It is unfortunate that in many countries, including the United States, views of Israel have become increasingly negative since the war in Gaza began. But in the current moment, Israel must prioritize its war aims even at the cost of external criticism. Allowing Hamas to remain the dominant military and governmental power in Gaza, either de jure or de facto, is unacceptable. The full demilitarization of Gaza, which requires military force, is the only way to keep Israel truly safe.

## **ON THE FRONT FOOT**

A core pillar of the new national security strategy is a greater willingness to use force to prevent enemies from developing capabilities that threaten Israel. Iran's efforts to develop nuclear arms and produce thousands of long-range ballistic missiles pose an existential challenge to Israel. Although Israel carried out covert actions targeting Iran's nuclear program in the past, in June, Israel launched an unprecedented military operation to degrade Tehran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and to significantly delay their development. Israel launched this operation despite being aware of the price it might pay in the event of Iranian retaliation and the possibility that its strikes would ignite a regional war.

Israeli leaders have not changed their goal of preventing Iran from rebuilding its nuclear and ballistic capabilities after the June campaign and subsequent cease-fire. Israel is willing to strike again if necessary, even if doing so leads to further rounds of fighting. The government now insists on enforcement arrangements that would prevent Iran from enriching uranium on its soil, controlling a nuclear fuel cycle, or advancing the weaponization of its nuclear capabilities. Israel also wants to prevent Iran from producing ballistic missiles and precision weapons that in significant quantities could pose an existential threat to Israel. Any agreement must include effective enforcement measures: Israeli leaders understand that enforcement without an agreement is preferable to a formal agreement that fails to actually stop Iran.

Although regime change in Iran is not an explicit goal of Israel's strategy, Iran will remain a threat as long as any clerical regime guided by the vision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini holds power in Tehran. Iran's economy and political regime are already weakened, so Israel hopes to encourage the United States and

European countries to reimpose major economic sanctions on Iran, including freezing Iranian assets overseas, banning travel for Iranian individuals, and preventing the transfer of arms or military technology to Iran. The goal is to further isolate the Iranian regime and prevent it from posing a strategic threat to the region.

## **NO LETTING UP**

Israel's new strategy also means that the country's leadership no longer restricts itself to conventional paradigms for how to address the ongoing war in Gaza and the simmering conflict in the West Bank. In its new approach, there is only one way to truly end the conflict in Gaza: removing Hamas as the dominant force and demilitarizing the territory by ridding it of weapons in the hands of hostile actors; killing, capturing, or exiling the vast majority of enemy commanders and fighters; and dismantling any infrastructure that allows Hamas to manufacture weapons or maintain its rule.

Israeli leaders believe that if Hamas emerges from the war still in control of Gaza, the group's regional allies will see Hamas as the victor. This will embolden other jihadi groups, who will come to believe that they, too, can attack Israel and win.

This explains Israel's strategy in Gaza. Israeli decision-makers feel they must be prepared to capture and hold territory in Gaza until Israel can neutralize the vast majority of remaining fighters and destroy Hamas's tunnels, weapons, and workshops. From this perspective, Israel must retain control over parts of Gaza—particularly in the north and along the perimeter bordering Israel—to ensure that Hamas cannot attack Israeli border communities or rebuild its capabilities. In the longer term, Israel must retain the ability to use force to root out terrorists, even if local and international actors take responsibility for the day-to-day civil administration of Gaza.

To fully defeat Hamas, Israel must prevent the group from controlling inflows of supplies that it uses to feed its fighters, fill its coffers, and operate its tunnels. Israel must facilitate and enhance the distribution of food and medicine in ways that prevent such supplies from falling into Hamas's hands. Going forward, the only way for Israel to ensure that aid is going to civilians and not Hamas is to provide aid in places where Hamas is not in control. The Israeli military should enable Gazan civilians to move to areas beyond Hamas's reach and provide aid in

those places. As the Israeli military campaign clears Hamas out of more parts of Gaza, Israel and humanitarian organizations can provide more aid and increase the number of distribution sites for civilians to access.

## **ROOTED IN REALITY**

Although some observers have called for ending the war and proposed empowering alternative groups to run Gaza, these proposals will fail as long as Hamas remains the strongest force in the territory. If the group is not removed as the dominant power, a technocratic government made up of independent national administrators will merely provide a façade behind which Hamas could rebuild its military capabilities. Israeli leaders also cannot trust that any foreign peacekeeping force would be willing or able to carry out the difficult work of combating Hamas's residual capabilities or of preventing the group from rebuilding its military strength.

The steep challenge of how to construct a postwar order in Gaza that would give Israel the security it needs has led many Israeli policymakers to conclude that the best idea would be to encourage voluntary emigration from Gaza. This would allow civilians to leave the war zone and also make it easier, quicker, and less costly for Israel to locate and destroy all of Hamas's remaining tunnels and military infrastructure, which is necessary to enable the reconstruction of the territory. Although many world leaders dismissed U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal for voluntary emigration as unrealistic or dangerous, it is one of the few ideas for how to solve the intractable conflict that rejects the failed orthodoxies of the past. Polls conducted both before and after October 7 by Palestinian and international research centers show that between 30 and 50 percent of Gazans would emigrate if given the opportunity. Israel and its neighbors must create the conditions that allow for such voluntary emigration, including by enabling the free and safe exit of civilians to third countries.

Although Egypt and Jordan are unwilling to accept large numbers of Gazans, other Arab and Muslim-majority countries may be willing to do so. The United States could facilitate this process by making U.S. investment in reconstruction projects in Syria conditional on the Syrian government relocating and hiring Gazans to do some of the work. In the long run, once Hamas has been eliminated and Gaza has been demilitarized and rebuilt, Palestinian civilians who want to return to Gaza could do so, as long as Israel retains security responsibility over

the territory.

Israel's new national security strategy recognizes the central role that ideology plays in motivating its enemies. In the past, Israel's largely secular elites minimized the importance of radical Islamist ideologies. This has failed, so Israeli leaders today are crafting their new approach on the premise that Hamas's ideology has deeply shaped the worldview of many Gazans. Given that the median age in Gaza is 18, and that Hamas took control of Gaza 18 years ago, at least half the population has grown up under Hamas's rule and absorbed the group's message through the schools, mosques, and media outlets that Hamas controls. Israel must pursue a program of long-term deradicalization, including introducing new educational curricula, banning religious leaders or media figures from promoting terrorism, and empowering new leaders who promote coexistence. Israel would need to insist that the actors responsible for the civil administration of Gaza are committed to advancing a culture of peace and moderation rather than one of terrorism and extremism.

Similar principles should apply to Israel's approach to the West Bank. The Oslo accords, which aimed to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank, failed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and instead signaled to Palestinian leaders that Israel was weak and could be pressured into conceding territory. Now, Israel is taking a more forceful position to prevent hostile groups from operating on its borders and threatening its citizens. Israelis do not trust the Palestinian Authority, which runs the West Bank, because of its systemic corruption and support for terrorism. Rather than make security compromises to try to prevent the Palestinian Authority's collapse merely because the PA is better than Hamas, Israel's new security approach calls for intensifying military operations deep inside the West Bank, preventing Palestinians from building infrastructure meant to support terrorism, and maintaining a long-term military presence in areas in which terrorist groups operate.

After the October 7 attacks, most Israelis now believe that the PA is not a partner for peace capable of ensuring Israel's security. There can be no two-state solution because the leaders of the PA and many Palestinians continue to reject the legitimacy of Israel's existence. A May 2025 poll found that nearly half the Palestinians in the West Bank believed that armed struggle was the best way to get to a Palestinian state. Any type of lasting solution acceptable to Israel will require the Palestinians to reject terrorism in both word and deed and commit to

accepting Israel as a sovereign Jewish state.

Today, to move forward in the West Bank, Israel should formally apply its domestic laws—rather than military laws—to the Jordan Valley, which constitutes up to 30 percent of the territory and is mostly under Israeli control. Given the critical importance of the Jordan Valley to Israel's security, such a step would clarify that Israel intends to hold on to this area under any future political arrangement, a position that enjoys a wide consensus in Israel. Although some critics may argue that these moves would violate international law, Israel broadly views the West Bank as disputed territory over which Israel has a strong legal, diplomatic, and historical case for sovereign control. Israeli leaders therefore view it as a valid sovereign claim rather than an attempt to annex others' land.

## **PARTNERS BEYOND BORDERS**

For Israelis, the October 7 massacre was a searing reminder that Israel is still fighting for its existence. The conclusion that decision-makers have drawn—and that much of the public supports—is that Israel must embrace a new security approach built on strength, power projection, and proactive efforts to ensure its safety. Israel's commitment to flexing its strength will require the country to change its approach to partnerships to protect its strategic autonomy.

Israeli leaders believe in cooperating with Arab and Muslim states, but they will not do so at the expense of critical security interests. Israel is committed to advancing the Abraham Accords and to working with any of its current partners—including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates—to promote regional development and counter Iran and Sunni Islamist groups. Israel is also interested in promoting multilateral initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a proposed trade route running from India to Europe. But Israeli leaders remain cautious of working with regional leaders who might harbor jihadi ideologies hostile to Israel, such as Syrian President Ahmed al-Shara, who previously belonged to an al-Qaeda affiliate.

The United States remains Israel's most important ally and continues to play a central role in Israel's new security paradigm, but Israel must recalibrate parts of its relationship with Washington to create more room for strategic autonomy. Former U.S. President Joe Biden's actions to prevent or slow-walk the sale of some military equipment to Israel—and the continued support from some U.S.

lawmakers for other restrictions on arms sales to Israel—have demonstrated the need for Israel to expand its domestic military production, diversify its military partnerships, and fortify its supply chains. Although Trump has supported Israel and provided the country with military assistance, Israeli leaders know they must develop new partnerships and capabilities beyond the United States.

To do this, Israel must invest heavily over the next decade in strengthening its military R & D and manufacturing capabilities. Israel can also strengthen its own position in its strategic partnership with the United States by gradually shifting away from an overreliance on U.S. military financing and toward U.S.-Israeli joint ventures. Israel greatly values its alliance with the United States, including in advanced technology and intelligence sharing, but at the end of the day, Israel's new approach requires that Israel be able to act alone if it has no other choice.

By embracing a strategy that prioritizes real security concerns over wishful diplomacy and proactive intervention over reactive restraint, Israel is making itself stronger, not weaker. It can thrive only if its borders are secure, existential challenges on its periphery are removed, and its regional partnerships grow deeper. Even as Israel pursues peace, it must recognize the continued need for military action in the face of regional threats. As long as Israeli leaders continue to embrace this new paradigm, it will safeguard Israel and create the necessary conditions for a more stable and prosperous Middle East in the future.

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