



# Israel Seeks A New Strategic Concept

April 11, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman** *National Institute for Public Policy*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Terrorism; Gaza; Israel

On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas carried out a brazen, large-scale attack on communities in the south of Israel. The offensive, dubbed “Al-Aqsa Flood,” entailed the breaching of the border fence separating Israel from the Gaza Strip by hundreds of militants, and subsequent systematic assaults on population centers, social gatherings, and other soft targets. The results were horrific; Hamas’ campaign of terror left more than 1,200 Israelis dead in the largest slaughter of Jews to take place since the Holocaust more than eight decades earlier.

In response, Israel has launched a large-scale military offensive in the Gaza Strip – a protracted campaign that, six months later, is still ongoing. Its goals are two-fold, albeit potentially contradictory. The first is to remove Hamas from power in the Gaza Strip, degrade the group’s strategic capabilities, and prevent it from ever presenting a threat to Israeli security ever again – an objective that, Israeli officials have made clear, will require the establishment of a new “security regime” in the enclave.<sup>[1]</sup> The second is to secure the return of the 130-plus hostages that remain in Hamas captivity.

In tandem with its military offensive against Hamas, however, Israel has experienced a deeper strategic shift. A sea change is now taking place in Israel’s approach to security affairs, informed by the errors and miscalculations that made the atrocities of October 7th possible.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Flawed Assumptions

During the 1990s, the peace process with the Palestinians occupied center stage in Israeli foreign and defense policy, and hopes ran high that some form of a durable settlement to the long-running Israeli-Palestinian confrontation was in fact possible. Over time, however, those expectations dimmed amid widespread corruption within the Palestinian Authority as well as unremitting hostility on the part of Palestinian rejectionist groups. As a consequence, successive governments in Israel focused less and less on the Palestinian “arena” in favor of other political and strategic priorities.

This approach paid clear dividends, allowing Israel to invert traditional thinking about Israeli-Arab relations (which had long posited that peace with the Palestinians needed to precede any normalization with the broader Arab world). In its place, Israel embraced an “outside in” approach, working to forge strategic (and subsequently economic and cultural) bonds with multiple regional states. The result was the establishment, in 2020, of the “Abraham Accords” normalizing Israel’s relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, and ushering in a qualitatively new era in regional politics. As a side effect, the “Palestinian question” receded in urgency for Israeli policymakers, who came to embrace a two-pronged strategy for managing relations with the Palestinians.

The first element of this approach was an extensive reliance on technology and innovation to provide “domain awareness” over the Palestinian territories. Policymakers in Jerusalem came to believe that the elaborate system of high-tech surveillance and monitoring erected over the past two decades in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip provided them with extensive security. This system, they contended, allowed them to spot key indicators of emerging threats to Israeli society.<sup>[3]</sup>

The second was a conviction that, over time, the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation could be significantly ameliorated, if not solved outright, through economic prosperity. Over the past decade-and-a-half, Israel has distinguished itself through its ingenuity, technological dynamism and market acumen, and global markets have taken notice. In the context of the Palestinians, Israeli governments banked heavily on the “trickle down” effect of the resulting prosperity on Palestinian sentiment.<sup>[4]</sup> Indeed, not unlike the longstanding (and now obsolete) U.S. approach to China, officials in Jerusalem came to see greater economic interaction as a way to make the Palestinians a “responsible stakeholder” and durable peace partner.

Over time, these features led Israel to abandon its earlier, pro-active stance toward Palestinian extremism. Instead, the country assumed a reactive posture, in which it largely focused on retaliating tactically, and in limited fashion, to incidents of extremist activity emanating from the Palestinian territories.<sup>[5]</sup>

The October 7th attacks underscored the bankruptcy of both of these assumptions. The fact that Israeli officials missed (or ignored) key indicators of preparations for a large-scale incursion from the Gaza Strip highlights what amounts to a multi-domain breakdown in intelligence, both in the immediate Palestinian theater as well as further afield, in Israel’s monitoring of connected threats (like the activities of Iran, a key state sponsor of Hamas). Similarly, as David Makovsky of the Washington Institute has argued, “expecting Hamas to abandon ideology for economics was a mistake with fatal consequences.”<sup>[6]</sup>

## The Contours of a New Concept

In the aftermath of Hamas' campaign of terror, the need for a new strategic concept (*conceptziya* in Hebrew) has become glaring. Half-a-year on, some of the details remain in flux. However, a number of defining features of the resulting reconfiguration are already evident.

**Proactive defense** – Having successfully de-nuclearized not one but two sovereign nations (Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007), Israel is rightly viewed as a leader in military “preemption.” Recent years, however, have seen it gravitate toward a campaign of tactical operations designed to delay full-on conflict while eroding the capabilities of non-state actors like Hamas and Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia.[7] In the aftermath of October 7th, such a strategic posture appears increasingly untenable. The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has laid out plans for a long-term forward presence in the Gaza Strip, entailing Israeli military control for an indefinite period as well as the establishment of buffer zones to better protect Israeli civilians from cross-border hostilities.[8] Beyond Gaza, meanwhile, Israeli officials and experts now agree broadly that a “northern front” will be necessary to eliminate the long-term threat posed by Hezbollah to population centers in the country's north.[9] These shifts are portents of things to come. As Israel increasingly adopts a tripwire defense posture, it will inevitably be propelled into greater conflict along its periphery. That, in turn, will require the country to strike a new *modus vivendi* with neighboring nations that affords it the enhanced security it now demands.

**Manpower needs** – Historically, Israel has excelled in short, intense conflicts (such as the 1967 Six Day War and the subsequent 1973 Yom Kippur War). By contrast, it has experienced greater difficulties in more protracted ones. Indeed, Israel's current campaign against Hamas already ranks as the country's longest war since 1948 and has exposed real shortcomings in the country's current military posture. With a standing army smaller than 200,000, Israel relies heavily on reserve forces to bolster troop strength and augment fighting capacity. The immediate aftermath of October 7th witnessed a massive mobilization of military reservists, swelling the ranks of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) by nearly 300 percent.[10] The protracted nature of the current conflict, however, has taken a tangible toll on Israeli society, as well as the national economy. As a result, Israel has been forced to scale down its operational tempo in Gaza and institute early conscription for draft-age Israelis as remedial measures.[11] More lasting fixes are also in the works – including, most notably, the potential institutionalization of conscription for Israel's *haredi* (orthodox) community, which historically has been exempt from national military service.[12] But such steps have the power to reignite the significant social tensions that previously prevailed within the country, and which had coalesced into the most acute political crisis in its history.

**Wartime economic footing** – In the wake of October 7th, Israel's government was forced to reconfigure the country's budget, and shunt large amounts of money to the IDF to bankroll sustained military operations. Israel's 2024 budget, which has already been passed by the Knesset, reflects a similar calculus, and allocates massive financial sums to what policy planners in Jerusalem envision as a state of perpetual war for the foreseeable future.[13] Such an economic “war footing” will dramatically alter the country's spending priorities, and leech resources away from key sectors such as housing and infrastructure. It also has the potential to erode Israel's global economic standing. Already, credit agency Moody's has downgraded the country's credit rating, assessing ongoing risks from the current conflict and outlining a negative outlook for the near term.[14] Preserving Israel's attractiveness as a global hub for innovation will be both increasingly challenging and exceedingly urgent under these conditions.

**Stockpiling** – To keep pace with ongoing combat needs, multiple branches of the Israeli military are now dramatically ramping up their procurement efforts, seeking the added resources and equipment necessary for a new era of air-supported special operations and low intensity conflict.[15] Notably, Israeli politicians make clear, this effort is intended not only to fully resource the country's current war with Hamas, but likewise to ensure the IDF is properly equipped to prosecute a future conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon.[16] This has led policymakers in Jerusalem to seek to revise the country's existing Memorandum of Understanding with the United States, and pave the way for supplemental and expanded American aid.[17]

### Implications for the “Special Relationship”

These new priorities have profound implications for the future of Israel's long-standing strategic partnership with the United States. Already, the demands of Israel's new security realities have put pressure on the political *status quo* between the two countries. For instance, Israel's ongoing campaign in Gaza – together with its concurrent requests for additional funding and resources – have faced resistance from segments of the Democratic Party, with voices in Congress calling for the conditioning of further aid as a way of limiting Israel's offensive operations.[18] Moreover, as Israel's offensive has continued, international concerns have mounted regarding humanitarian conditions in Gaza as well as collateral casualties, leading to growing pressure on the Israeli government from the White House.[19] Problematic, too, has been the Biden administration's election year push for some form of Palestinian statehood – something that is vociferously opposed by Israeli society in the aftermath of Hamas' atrocities.[20]

Will these factors cause a fundamental reconfiguration of the strategic bonds between Washington and Jerusalem? Only time will tell. While relations between the two countries have ebbed and flowed in response to the political priorities of successive American administrations, the U.S. Congress has historically served as a wellspring of support for the Jewish state. Nevertheless, it is already clear that new political pressures, together with Israel's reconfigured post-October 7th security priorities, will test the “special relationship” between the two countries in novel and profound ways.

[1] Emanuel Fabian, “Israel sets out 3 phases of war; will seek new ‘security regime’ once Hamas vanquished,” *Times of Israel*, October 20, 2023, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gallant-says-after-hamas-vanquished-israel-will-seek-new-security-regime-in-gaza/>.

[2] See, for instance, David Isaac, “Israel jettisons old concepts: ‘We won't stop until Hamas destroyed,’” *jns.org*, November 1, 2023, available at <https://www.jns.org/israel-jettisons-old-concepts-we-wont-stop-until-hamas-destroyed/>.

[3] See, for instance, Sophia Goodfriend, “Israel's High-Tech Surveillance Was Never Going to Bring Peace,” *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2023, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/30/israel-palestine-gaza-hamas-war-idf-high-tech-surveillance/>.

[4] David Makovsky, “The Collapse of Israel's Hamas ‘Conceptziya,’” *The National Interest*, October 26, 2023, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/collapse-israel-s-hamas-conceptzia-207058>.

- [5] John P. Walters, "The Painful Lesson: Defense Is Not Enough," *Hudson Institute Report*, January 17, 2024, available at [https://www.hudson.org/security-alliances/painful-lesson-defense-not-enough-israel-hamas-john-walters?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=WR%20Israels%20Painful%20Lesson%20Defense%20Is%20Not%20Enough&utm\\_content=WR%20Israels%20Painful%20Lesson%20Defense%20Is%20Not%20Enough](https://www.hudson.org/security-alliances/painful-lesson-defense-not-enough-israel-hamas-john-walters?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=WR%20Israels%20Painful%20Lesson%20Defense%20Is%20Not%20Enough&utm_content=WR%20Israels%20Painful%20Lesson%20Defense%20Is%20Not%20Enough)
- [6] Makovsky, "The Collapse of Israel's Hamas 'Conceptziya,'" op. cit.
- [7] For the rationale behind this thinking, see Gadi Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, "The Campaign Between Wars: How Israel Rethought Its Strategy to Counter Iran's Malign Regional Influence," *Washington Institute PolicyWatch* 3174, September 4, 2019, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/campaign-between-wars-how-israel-rethought-its-strategy-counter-irans-malign>.
- [8] Patrick Kingsley and Thomas Fuller, "Netanyahu Issues First Plan for Postwar Gaza," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/23/world/middleeast/netanyahu-postwar-plan-gaza-palestinians-reject.html>.
- [9] Ruth Marks Eglash, "Odds of Israel-Hezbollah war 'inevitable,' experts fear: 'Totally pessimistic,'" *Fox News*, February 19, 2024, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/world/odds-of-israel-hezbollah-war-inevitable-experts-fear-totally-pessimistic>.
- [x10] See, for instance, Jennifer Hassan and Adam Taylor, "Israel's massive mobilization of 360,000 reservists upends lives," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2023, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/10/israel-military-draft-reservists/>.
- [11] Patrick Kingsley and Johnatan Reiss, "Israel, Shifting War Tempo, Tailors Its Messages for Home and Abroad," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/09/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-new-phase.html>; Gavriel Fiske, "Pre-army academies roiled by IDF early draft notices, bemoan 'lack of transparency,'" *Times of Israel*, February 8, 2024, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pre-army-academies-roiled-by-idf-early-draft-notices-bemoan-lack-of-transparency/>.
- [12] See, for instance, Jeremy Sharon, "AG says army must start process to draft Haredim, warns against trying to bypass court," *Times of Israel*, March 31, 2024, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ag-says-army-must-start-process-to-draft-haredim-warns-against-trying-to-bypass-court/>.
- [13] Steven Scheer, "Israeli cabinet passes amended 2024 budget adding \$15 billion for war," *Reuters*, January 15, 2024, available at [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-cabinet-passes-amended-budget-adding-15-billion-war-2024-01-15/#:~:text=JERUSALEM%2C%20Jan%2015%20\(Reuters\),and%20Prime%20Minister%27s%20Office%20said](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-cabinet-passes-amended-budget-adding-15-billion-war-2024-01-15/#:~:text=JERUSALEM%2C%20Jan%2015%20(Reuters),and%20Prime%20Minister%27s%20Office%20said).
- [14] Pushkala Aripaka, "Moody's downgrades Israel's credit rating on war risks; outlook negative," *Reuters*, February 9, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/moodys-downgrades-israel-a2-2024-02-09/>.
- [15] See, for instance, Yoav Limor, "Exclusive: Israeli Air Force working on massive procurement plan as lesson from war," *Israel Hayom*, January 17, 2024, available at <https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/01/17/exclusive-israeli-air-force-working-on-massive-procurement-plan-as-lesson-from-war/>.
- [16] Author's interview with Israeli lawmaker, Washington, DC, February 2024.
- [17] Notably, in light of the missile capabilities displayed by Hamas as well as the far-more-formidable stockpile amassed by Hezbollah, this is expected to include assistance for augmented missile defense, including added interceptors for the Iron Dome system and research funds to speed development and production of projects like the Iron Beam laser defense.
- [18] See, for instance, Laura Kelly, "Democrats propose amendment conditioning aid to Israel over delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza," *The Hill*, February 7, 2024, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/4453366-democrats-propose-amendment-conditioning-aid-to-israel-over-delivery-of-humanitarian-assistance-to-gaza/>.
- [19] See, for instance, Jeff Mason and Steve Holland, "Biden to Netanyahu: Protect civilians in Gaza or US policy will change," *Reuters*, April 5, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-speaks-with-israels-netanyahu-after-strike-kills-food-aid-workers-2024-04-04/>.
- [20] "Israel opposes 'unilateral' imposition of Palestinian state," *Reuters*, February 18, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-formalize-israels-opposition-unilateral-imposition-palestinian-state-2024-02-18/>. There is a broad consensus within Israeli society that any near-term movement toward Palestinian statehood would be tantamount to rewarding Hamas for its barbarism.