



Israel's Strategic Challenges and Security Cooperation: JINSA Generals & Admirals 2024 Program Report

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2024 JINSA Generals and Admirals Program participants meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on June 27, 2024. Photo includes all program participants. The listed authors are solely responsible for the content of the report.

August 28, 2024

Introduction

At the end of June 2024, we traveled to Israel as part of a delegation of retired U.S. general and flag officers organized by the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA). The trip came during a critical moment for Israel, nearly nine months after Hamas’s brutal October 7 attack, as military operations in Gaza continued, disagreements with the United States were growing more pronounced, but even greater and more challenging threats—particularly Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran—consumed Israel’s attention.

During our 10 days on the ground, we had access to the highest echelons of Israel’s political, military, and intelligence leadership, as well as to a wide range of Israeli military commanders and several Israeli soldiers, who gave us insight into their decisions, challenges, objectives, and concerns.¹

We have prepared this report to present to our active-duty colleagues, U.S. policymakers, and the American public what we saw and heard in Israel—including that which surprised us or which we had not known before. We have also included our insights and reflections in the hopes that they might add to the discussion on U.S. national interests in the Middle East and our relationship with Israel, an exceptionally important partner confronting daunting security challenges.

I. October 7

Even nine months after Hamas’s horrific October 7 attack on Israel, we were struck by how much we still had to learn about the events of that tragic day in Israel—and how important comprehending what happened then is vital to understanding what is happening now. What stood out to us in boldest relief was the sheer brutality of the attack, the depth of coordination and planning, and its joyous reception by some within Gaza.² The world seems to have moved on from October 7. Israel has not.

A. Observations

As former military commanders, many of us with combat experience, we were shocked by the violence and atrocities perpetrated by Hamas. Israel assembled raw footage of the October 7 attack into a 47-minute video, called “Bear Witness,” much of which the perpetrators filmed themselves. The gruesome video captures the murder of 139 people, roughly 10 percent of those whom Hamas murdered that day. The brutality we witnessed in that video, and its remnants that we saw at one of the communities that was attacked, exceeds anything we have previously seen. It was a clear and organized expression of hatred. Given the ample footage of widespread joy from ordinary Gazans about the murder and kidnapping of Israelis, the hatred appears to be shared by at least some within Gaza.³ Israelis argued to us that it will take several generations and substantial reforms to the education system in Gaza to overcome the hatred that led some Palestinian civilians to support the murder and kidnapping of Israelis. Simply, reconstruction without deradicalization in Gaza will be a prescription for failure.

According to several senior Israeli officials, this horrific attack happened because Israel allowed Hamas to grow.⁴ But whatever its causes, Hamas’s combination on October 7 of a complex, multi-pronged assault with trained and directed brutality against Israeli civilians has left Israel’s sense of security deeply shaken.⁵

B. Insights

Watching the “Bear Witness” video helped us to understand more fully both what happened on October 7 and Israel’s actions since. But Israel has only selectively released the footage due to sensitivities for the victims and their families.⁶ If the video were more widely available and watched, we believe Israel might be better able to make its case for why Hamas needs to be destroyed as a military force and is unfit to govern Gaza politically.

II. Strategic Context

Despite being frequently described as a “Gaza war,” Israel is, in fact, fighting a multi-front conflict. Israeli leadership described this to us as not just a regional conflict but a global one, in which the Iran-Russia-China-North Korea axis is targeting the West.⁷ This underscores the importance of an interconnected U.S. regional and global strategy, particularly to counter and deter Iran.

A. Observations

The ongoing surge of malign Iranian activity has broad implications not only for the United States and its allies in the region, but—as Iranian proxies’ assault on global shipping demonstrates—the entire world.

1. Iran’s Ring of Fire

Israeli officials emphasized to us the importance of viewing the conflict not as a one- or two-front, but as a seven-front-war. We learned that, in Gaza, Israeli troops found plans for an all-out, multi-front combined air and ground campaign against Israel.⁸ And, indeed, October 7 sparked a regional conflagration, although perhaps at a lower intensity than what Hamas might have hoped for.

Iranian proxies threaten Israel from not just Gaza and Lebanon but also the powder keg of the West Bank, Syria, and Iraq. Yemen, although much farther from Israel, has become an active front as well, with the Houthis proving recently that they can use Iranian drones to reach as far as Tel Aviv.⁹ Iran itself became a seventh front following its unprecedented April 13-14 attack on Israel, in which it fired over 350 projectiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli soil.¹⁰ Israeli officials told us Iran seeks to topple the current Jordanian government to threaten Israel on yet another of its borders. If they are correct, Jordan could soon become an eighth front.

This encirclement of Israel is the result of Iran investing an estimated \$7 billion annually to build a “ring of fire” around Israel and much of the rest of the Middle East.¹¹ An Israeli official framed the growth of Iranian-funded militias that can overpower their countries’ governments as representing the collapse of the post-World War I Middle Eastern order of sovereign states with clearly delineated borders.¹² The question now is whether Israel, and friendly Arab states, succumb to Iran’s destabilization or, with U.S. assistance, repel Iran’s imperial project.

2. Gaza as a Global War

More striking to us than the regional dimensions of Israel’s war with Hamas was Israeli officials’ conclusion that it is part of a global war by the Iran-Russia-China-North Korea axis. This broader conflict, in their view, is being waged not against Israel primarily, but the United States and the

Western world at large. Although not a monolith, with axis members and proxies often acting opportunistically independent from the other members, there is certainly evidence of cooperation within this axis.

Our Israeli interlocutors pointed to several ways in which their Middle Eastern conflict has already globalized, and several more in which it could yet develop. Techniques and technologies used, or designed to be used, against Israel are also being used by other members of the anti-Western axis. The rockets, missiles, and drones that have rained down on Israeli communities for years, for example, are now also a defining feature of Russia's war against Ukraine.¹³ Iranian-made or -designed drones are now an important part of Russia's aerial arsenal.¹⁴ Much as Iran and its proxies did during the April 13 attack, Russia frequently launches barrages of Iranian one-way attack drones at Ukrainian military and civilian sites, both to inflict damage and to confuse Ukrainian air defenses so that larger, more destructive missiles can successfully reach their targets.¹⁵

Iran's war against Israel, meanwhile, is made possible in part by funds that Tehran earns by selling its oil to China. But Israel is not the only country that bears the impact. The costs and delays to global shipping imposed by the Iran-backed Houthis' aggression against commercial vessels in the Red Sea are borne by consumers around the world and represent a direct threat to a U.S. national interest in freedom of navigation.

Unfortunately, this ability to close off a maritime chokepoint with relatively cheap Iranian-supplied drones and missiles may presage further threats to the international order. Israeli officials noted that Iran's backing of the Polisario terrorist group in Morocco could endanger shipping through the key chokepoint of the Strait of Gibraltar.¹⁶ Hezbollah's possession of anti-ship missiles—estimated to number over 80—also threatens to impede maritime traffic in the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁷ Having seen the success of the Houthis' assault on global maritime trade, another Israeli official suggested that Iran may direct its proxies to target global aviation. These threats will only become more dangerous if Iran is able to develop nuclear weapons, receives advanced military technology from Russia, China, or North Korea, or if both occur.

3. Prospects for Cooperation and Peace

There is some good news in the Middle East. As a counterpoint to the growing Iranian threat, Israeli leaders pointed to the regional defense cooperation that grew out of the twin developments of a) the Abraham Accords and b) the transition of Israel from U.S. European Command's Area of Responsibility (AOR) to that of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

That cooperation was most fully on display during Iran's April 13 attack on Israel.¹⁸ Although the Israeli military officials we spoke with insisted that they could have defended against the attack

themselves, they also readily admitted they were grateful for the assistance they received—including from regional partners. Israeli military and political leaders could not have been more pleased with the newfound level of cooperation and coordination between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and CENTCOM. They spoke hopefully of the potential to build on the success of that night to transform what has thus far been ad hoc and one-off instances of information sharing and joint defense into a more formal and enduring regional security architecture.

Israel's leaders also told us that they think it's possible to expand their partnerships in the region, in particular through normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ But they were also realistic about the obstacles to reaching a deal with Riyadh, namely U.S. demands that such an agreement include "irreversible" steps toward a Palestinian state.²⁰

Although Israeli political leaders expressed optimism to us that self-governance for Palestinians was more within reach now than it had been in the previous two decades due to the removal of Hamas as a military and political force in Gaza, they still warned that it is a long way off.²¹ This is not least because of security concerns. Indeed, they noted that the majority of the Israeli public staunchly opposed focusing on a two-state solution in the aftermath of October 7.²² But their reasoning was also political—it would take a generation, at least, in their estimation, to de-radicalize Gaza and the West Bank alike and build rule of law, accountability, and the political culture necessary for Palestinians to be able to rule themselves. Until such a time, Israeli leaders told us they would put their country's security first, ahead even of regional integration. The prospects for Israeli-Saudi normalization, thus, could depend on creative wordsmithing that creates a "pathway" to Palestinian statehood, and which threads the needle between U.S. demands and Israeli security concerns.

B. Insights

Even as the United States seeks to focus its attention on the more immediate threats in Asia and Europe, it cannot ignore that Iran is emerging as a crucial partner for Russia and China or that the Middle East continues to grow as an important strategic playing field for U.S. competitors. We came away convinced that an effective U.S. strategy to outcompete its pacing threat must also contain a regional strategy for the Middle East for four primary reasons. First, Iran's role as a global weapons proliferator has grown. Second, Iran continues to expand its network of proxies that can be used against U.S. partners or interests, including the freedom of navigation. Third, an Iranian nuclear weapon would have a destabilizing impact not only in the Middle East but also in other theaters. Fourth, Iranian aggression could be used to distract from axis operations in other theaters.

Any such effective U.S. strategy for the Middle East should seek to deter Iranian aggression, prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and disrupt its supply of weapons to proxies and axis members alike. The centerpiece strategy should be expanding regional cooperation, particularly between Arab states and Israel, and building out a regional security architecture that empowers regional U.S. partners to work together to address the Iranian threat.

III. Northern War

We heard one message loudly and clearly from every interlocutor we had in Israel: a northern war is coming. It is not a question of if but rather when. There were disagreements, particularly between the political and military leadership, on when Israel might have to go to war with Hezbollah, but no one doubted that such a war would be necessary. Since our trip, a northern war has become even more likely with the Hezbollah rocket attack on July 28 that killed 12 Druze children and teenagers in the Golan Heights town of Majdal Shams and the ensuing Israeli strike in Beirut on July 30 that killed Fuad Shukur, the most senior Hezbollah commander.²³

A. Observations

Israeli officials see themselves as already being at war with Hezbollah, ever since the Iran-backed Lebanese terrorist group started firing on Israel on October 8, although the conflict remains relatively low-intensity for now.²⁴ Even at its current level of hostilities, the war has forced some 80,000 Israelis to flee their homes, destroyed upwards of 500 buildings inside Israel, and killed at least 49 Israelis.²⁵

Though the political and military leadership are not convinced that Iran and Hezbollah are interested in a full-scale war just yet and expressed reluctance on Israel's behalf to engage in one, they pointed to the lack of a solution for returning displaced Israelis to their homes as a strategic challenge for Israel that almost inevitably will lead to all-out war. The considerations that Israelis outlined for us about whether to go to war with Hezbollah included munitions availability, Israel's economy after a year of war, international legitimacy, domestic legitimacy, and the lack of Israel's strategic depth.

Even if some temporary deal leads to a ceasefire in the north, Israeli officials made clear that—after having wrongly believed that Hamas was deterred from launching a major attack against Israel—they are no longer willing to assume that deterrence will keep them safe from Hezbollah's massive arsenal of over 150,000 rockets, missiles, and drones.²⁶ Alternatively, it might be Iran's advancing nuclear program that sparks a northern war. Because Hezbollah's arsenal exists to deter and punish Israel from striking Iran's nuclear program militarily, commanders we spoke with

highlighted that preventing a nuclear Iran, which would pose an existential threat to Israel, would require destroying Hezbollah's retaliatory capability. Israeli military and intelligence officials warned that, with Iran now advancing in both nuclear enrichment and weaponization, they might need to act against its nuclear program within six months.²⁷

Some of the military leaders with whom we spoke with told us that they had recommended that, after October 7, Israel's military response be directed northward to prevent what they believed was an imminent Hezbollah attack. Even though the political leadership did not act on that recommendation then, it is clear that there is now widespread agreement in Israel that, at some point in the near future, eliminating the threat from Hezbollah will be necessary to ensure Israel's security. And they are clearly preparing to do exactly that. We met with military commanders whose units, having fought in Gaza, are now training explicitly for a campaign into Lebanon.

B. Insights

After hearing Israeli political and military leaders discuss how they see the threat, we believe it is a matter of when, not if, there is an all-out Israel-Hezbollah war. If such a war is unavoidable, then the United States has a clear interest in both containing it, so that it does not escalate to a regional conflict, but also ensuring that Israel reestablishes its security. The considerable dangers posed by an all-out war again underscored to us the dire importance of the United States projecting support, both rhetorically and in well-publicized arms transfers, for Israel to avoid Hezbollah and Iran being further emboldened and to restore deterrence.

IV. U.S.-Israeli Military Relationship

The strength of the U.S.-Israel security partnership has been on display since October 7—at both the highest and most technical levels. But the ongoing war also highlights the continued need for close cooperation and partnership, rather than public disagreements, between the two countries to address regional threats, maintain fullest deterrence towards Iran, and bolster Israeli legitimacy, which is at the heart of the Israeli concept of strategic depth.

A. Observations

Every Israeli political and military leader we met with thanked the United States for its support and underscored how crucial U.S. military assistance was to the Israeli war effort. When the United States fully backs Israel, they told us, Israel can fight harder and win faster. We also repeatedly heard warnings, however, that the converse is true: publicly aired disagreements between the United States and Israel increase the risks of further escalation by our common adversaries.

1. Strengths

In the aftermath of the October 7 attack, the United States signaled strong support for Israel's right to defend itself, and deployed U.S. military assets to deter Hezbollah or Iran from further escalating to a full-scale regional war.²⁸ Meanwhile, U.S. military equipment and jointly developed U.S.-Israel defense technologies have proven critical to IDF operations and yielded lessons for the U.S. military.

a. Post-10/7 Deterrent Signaling

Israeli leaders appreciated the quick and strong deterrent message sent by the United States in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attack. Our briefers mentioned in particular President Joe Biden's deployment of two carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean and telling Iranian and Hezbollah leadership "don't," in the early days of the war, which they feel helped prevent a bad situation for Israel from becoming even worse.

b. Israel's Relationship with CENTCOM

One particular change to the U.S. Unified Command Plan, as we heard from several Israeli military leaders, supercharged U.S.-Israeli military cooperation and proved crucial during the current war: the 2021 transfer of Israel to CENTCOM's AOR, which JINSA first recommended in 2018.²⁹

According to our IDF interlocutors, Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM was instrumental to thwarting Iran's April 13 attack against Israel. In the days before the attack, CENTCOM Commander General Michael "Erik" Kurilla traveled to Israel, which was not just a powerful show of support but also a vital opportunity to coordinate an air defense plan in-person.³⁰ When Iran attacked Israel, CENTCOM forces, supported by U.S. destroyers in the Mediterranean and Red Seas, shot down at least 81 drones and six ballistic missiles.³¹ U.S. forces also launched strikes in Yemen that destroyed seven Houthi drones and a ballistic missile before they left their launchpads.³² CENTCOM not only played a role as a bilateral partner with Israel but also facilitated multilateral cooperation between the Israeli, U.S., U.K., French, Jordanian, and Saudi militaries.³³ Such regional cooperation would have been unthinkable before the political progress of the Abraham Accords and without the coordination provided by CENTCOM.

c. F-35 Performance

The Israeli Air Force (IAF) was the first military to fly the fifth generation F-35 fighter in combat.³⁴ In the current conflict, we learned, the F-35 continues to prove itself as an outstanding platform, enabled by close U.S. industrial support for the IAF's F-35 squadrons and yielding important lessons for the U.S. F-35 fleet.³⁵

Leveraging the F-35's advanced radar and sensors, the IAF has flown it in coordination with fourth-generation fighters (F-16s), an operational technique called quarterbacking, so that it can feed the other aircraft threat data and help direct attacks.³⁶ Israel employed this technique, first developed by the United States, to excellent effect during the air defense operation against the Iranian attack on April 13.³⁷ During the current war, IAF pilots also executed the first-ever cruise missile interception by an F-35.³⁸

Israeli officials that we spoke with indicated that the U.S. government and Lockheed Martin provided extensive support to Israel's F-35 operations, including weekly meetings, quickly standing up depot maintenance in Israel, integrating Israeli data links to transmit threat and targeting information, and developing external pylons for the F-35 to carry more munitions, specifically GBU-35s, on the wings when the F-35 normally only carries bombs in its weapons bay.

d. Innovation-Sharing Relationship

The United States and Israel maintain close cooperation on ballistic missile defense (BMD), subterranean operations (SUB-T), counter-unmanned aerial systems (C-UAS), robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), and other emerging technologies, like cyber, quantum, and dual-use platforms.³⁹ The United States and Israel also work closely on air defenses, including the Iron Dome short-range air defense, the Arrow-3 long-range air defense, Trophy anti-tank missile countermeasures, and directed energy weapons, which are critical to defending against the rockets, drones, and missiles that Iran and its proxies are increasingly using to attack Israeli and U.S. forces alike.⁴⁰

2. Concerns

Despite the close U.S.-Israel military cooperation, the war has generated concerns about growing daylight between the United States and Israel as the war progresses. These have mainly manifested themselves in pauses or slowdowns in deliveries of key U.S. weapons and publicly aired disagreements about Israel's operations.⁴¹ Every Israeli leader we met with, political and military alike, warned us that such visible widening differences between Washington and Jerusalem embolden Iran and its proxies. International legitimacy, particularly U.S. support, is part of Israel's strategic depth, and Israeli officials acknowledged to us that this has eroded throughout the war.

a. Israel Needs More U.S. Weapons

Israel requires the operational certainty that timely, uninterrupted U.S. weapons deliveries provide in order to make calculated strategic choices. Yet, in May, the United States froze the sale of MK84 2,000-lb and MK82 500-lb bombs to Israel over fears about their use in the dense urban environment of Rafah.⁴² Israeli military commanders stressed to us that, given how munition-intensive the current war is and how dependent the IAF is on U.S. munitions, the weapons holdup risked leaving Israeli stockpiles extremely depleted. But the consequences of that would not

necessarily be felt in Gaza, the IDF told us, where they were convinced they could continue effective operations even without additional U.S. resupply. Every decision to use a bomb in the current Gaza conflict resulted in a host of follow-on resourcing decisions in a multi-front conflict. According to senior Israeli officials, since October 7, ironically, Iran has resupplied its surrogates more than the United States has resupplied Israel.⁴³

Instead, the effect of denying Israel U.S. munitions would be felt most acutely in the north. Hezbollah, the IDF warned, would be likely to escalate its attacks against Israel if it perceived that Israel lacked sufficient weapons to retaliate, let alone sustain a full-scale war in the north.⁴⁴

We were unable to meet Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant during our time in Israel because he was in Washington discussing precisely this issue of weapons deliveries.⁴⁵ Shortly afterwards, the United States unfroze the transfer of the MK82 500-lb bombs.⁴⁶

b. Uncoordinated Public Statements Cause Unnecessary Friction

Perhaps no other single issue so agitated our Israeli interlocutors as statements made by U.S. officials that, according to the Israeli perspective, appear to create public daylight between the United States and Israel. Every single Israeli official we met with raised how public airing of disagreements only serve to embolden Iran and its proxies, making a war with Hezbollah more likely, more likely to start sooner, and to be more devastating.

B. Insights

The acknowledged tremendous support from U.S. Central Command notwithstanding, the need for better communication and cooperation between the United States and Israel became readily apparent to us based on our discussions at all levels. Although the United States and Israel have shared interests, they are not identical, so there is a need for both sides to discuss differences whenever they arise in private to prevent adversaries from leveraging them to their advantage by eroding the legitimacy of Israel's operations.

1. Industrial Base Limitations

Modern wars require a modern industrial base. Yet, neither the United States nor Israel currently possess sufficient industrial capacity to meet their defense needs.⁴⁷ The current munitions shortage should be a wake-up call for U.S. and Israeli officials alike not only to expand their own industrial bases but also to work together, as well as with other partners, to build mechanisms for co-production and/or forward deployment and stockpiling of critical munitions to ensure that front-line countries are adequately equipped to deal with major threats.

2. Greater Technological Collaboration Potential

Israel is not only a recipient of U.S. military assistance but also a technological foundry developing cutting edge military and dual-use innovations.⁴⁸ The United States and Israel would both benefit from increasing their technological cooperation—ensuring that each country can access and use innovative products developed in the other—as well as investment in joint research and development. For example, a joint fund to advance commercial technology that has a dual military use would also further enable the U.S. and Israeli militaries to acquire capabilities without adding production burdens to the defense industrial base.

V. Conduct of Military Operations in Gaza

We had the privilege to meet IDF commanders and troops at every level, including junior officers, who were fighting in Gaza. What we heard and saw from them convinced us that the IDF has faced an unprecedented operational challenge in confronting Hamas, an adversary that intentionally and illegally exploits the presence of civilians in a dense urban environment made even more complex by the extensive presence of tunnels. Yet, despite these challenges, the IDF has maintained its commitment to fight in accordance with the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC).

A. Observations

The IDF spoke frankly about Hamas’s highly effective use of deception leading up to October 7 and while there were numerous “blinking lights” monitored by Israeli intelligence, they were unable to make the connections, in part due to desensitization over time by Hamas activities within Gaza, such as paragliding. The IDF was also very candid with us about the operational challenges they faced in Gaza. Three in particular stood out to us: Hamas’s use of civilian shields, the dense urban environment, and the hundreds of miles of tunnels underneath Gaza.

IDF commanders showed us evidence of how Hamas exploits the civilian population to hide itself, attack Israeli forces, and intentionally try to create civilian casualties. This included weapons caches and firing positions inside schools, mosques, and hospitals.⁴⁹ A senior Israeli military commander told us that Hamas used the early stages of the conflict to determine which sites Israel sought to avoid striking and then amassed its terror operatives in those very sites, including hospitals, schools, humanitarian zones, and UN facilities. In the latest operation in Rafah, an Israeli combat engineer recounted to us that every building, including civilian homes, had been rigged with explosives, requiring troops to create entry points through walls, rather than using booby trapped doors or windows.

But the most challenging obstacle for the IDF proved to be the vast network of tunnels crisscrossing under Gaza.⁵⁰ One IDF commander described the subterranean level to us as a standalone domain. Israeli officials admitted to being surprised about the quantity and size of Hamas's tunnels, which were used as weapons production facilities and depots, headquarters, and command-and-control nodes in addition to offensive purposes. Israeli officials cited the need for large quantities of explosives to neutralize the tunnels as a particular challenge.⁵¹

Having participated in joint U.S. warfighting, we were also struck by how the IDF conducted joint operations in Gaza under a single commander and aligned with the IDF Chief of the General Staff Lt Gen Herzi Halevi's emphasis on pushing mission command and authority down to regional commanders. The necessity of fighting a protracted conflict in terrain of unprecedented complexity, in a multi-front construct, likely drove such a change.

At the same time, IDF commanders stressed to us the lengths that they went to in order to mitigate the risks to civilians created by Hamas, such as notifying Gazans ahead of intended operations, providing them information on safer areas they should move to and evacuation routes to use, and even shielding fleeing civilians from attacks by Hamas. Israeli officials also detailed how Hamas has stolen humanitarian aid, preventing it from reaching civilians in Gaza, and then leveraged its own theft of the supplies to wage a disinformation campaign blaming Israel for the lack of aid reaching civilians in Gaza.⁵²

B. Insights

Israel faced an adversary who openly flouted basic norms of international law by interspersing combatants—who did not wear uniforms—in with civilians, all while most of the world scrutinized Israel's conduct, which nevertheless adheres to the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC).

1. Legal/Moral Conduct: Hamas

Hamas clearly knows that, its attack on October 7 notwithstanding, it cannot defeat Israel militarily. Instead, it seeks to defeat it in the arena of public opinion and international political and legal institutions. It does this by intentionally and illegally putting civilians in harm's way in the hopes that any civilian casualties will criminalize and delegitimize not just Israeli military operations but Israel itself. The scant public attention to Hamas's responsibility for civilian casualties and suffering in Gaza clearly demonstrates to us that its strategy is, unfortunately, proving effective.

2. Legal/Moral Conduct: Israel

Contrary to Hamas's attempts to cast Israel as a ruthless aggressor to undercut its international legitimacy and political ability to achieve its objectives, we believe that the IDF has demonstrated its commitment to LOAC throughout the conflict. The IDF routinely worked to evacuate civilians

from combat zones and mitigate civilian risk to great success, achieving, according to one Israeli official, among the lowest civilian-to-combatant casualty ratios in the history of warfare.⁵³ Every commander we spoke with stressed their commitment to operating within strict moral and legal guidelines, the same sort of commitment that we followed in our careers in the U.S. armed forces. The measures taken by the IDF to mitigate risks to civilians, and ample evidence that they are properly investigating and responding to all allegations of law of war violations, indicate that the IDF operations in Gaza were not simply a visceral response to the October 7 atrocities, but rather were legitimate, responsibly planned and executed military operations to defeat Hamas, a threat to both Israelis and Palestinians.

VI. Information Operations

Israel is losing international legitimacy due to ceding the field of information and ideas to Hamas, Iran, and others. It needs to do more to fight back.

A. Observations

Israel's strategic depth, as previously stated, is its legitimacy. As democracies, led by the United States, have painfully learned time and again since World War II, time in the form of protracted conflicts is not your friend—even more so in the globalized information age. Effectively an island, surrounded by enemies, Israel depends on the military and political support—not to mention trade and investment—of its Western partners to survive and prosper. That support is possible because Israel is seen as a just and legitimate cause. Should its legitimacy fray or be tarnished, Israeli officials acknowledged, Israel would encounter challenges in sustaining its strategic strength.

Unfortunately, that is precisely what is coming to pass in the current war. Hamas is succeeding in convincing large parts of the public, as well as international institutions, that the IDF has acted unjustly and illegally in Gaza, eroding Israel's legitimacy.⁵⁴ Indeed, one high-ranking military official explained to us how the constraints placed on Israel by increasing political pressure were more challenging than any operational complexities the IDF was encountering on the battlefield. Meanwhile, as one Israeli official explained to our group, Israel failed to create a body, institution, or capability to fight for its legitimacy.

B. Insights

The informational challenges facing Israel in the current war led us to believe that Israel needs to better wage a campaign to promote the legitimacy of its military operations and combat disinformation. The sole formal means for public messaging has been the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, but we do not believe this military entity is the right venue to portray all facets of the war,

including strategic decisions made at the political level. Instead, Israel would benefit from centrally coordinating a variety of civilians inside and outside of government who can combat disinformation on traditional and social media platforms. In addition, a dedicated office of strategic communications, possibly at the ministerial level, could coordinate public messaging and lead efforts to generate themes that specifically identify key public audiences, determine the best channels to deliver those messages, develop the mechanisms of effectively delivering that information, identify effective spokespeople for Israel—particularly those that highlight its diversity—and create means of measuring the impact of its information operations. It will remain a challenge to keep up with the fast pace of information and disinformation given how fast they spread, but Israel must strive to move from a reactive mode toward seizing the initiative in the information domain.

Endnotes

1. The participants met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior leaders of the Israel Defense Forces and Israeli government. They did not meet with leaders from Israeli opposition parties.
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