

WHAT ISRAELI VICTORY WOULD LOOK LIKE

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The Fate of Hamas

“I’m driving south to the Gaza corridor, the place Hamas invaded on Saturday (10/07),” Yonah Jeremy Bob says in our first phone conversation. “But it’s a straight drive, so let’s talk.”

Mr. Bob is an expert on the Israeli shadow war with Iran, the subject of his new book, “Target Tehran,” and he covers the Israeli intelligence agencies and military for the Jerusalem Post. He’s busy tracking down answers to the questions every Israeli wants answered: How could this have happened? What’s the plan? Who will pay?

Even after the corpses of Israeli civilians had been cleared, “it’s some sort of nightmare,” Mr. Bob says when we catch up later on Wednesday (10/11). “What I saw was once a living, happy place, and it has been utterly destroyed.”

Israeli intelligence misjudged Hamas. “In the worst case,” Mr. Bob says, the expectation was that “Hamas might be able to take over one village that’s really small for three hours” and kill 20 people. “There was no scenario where anybody talked about 22 villages, a whole area of the country, 1,200 Israelis killed, including 800 to 900 civilians. That wasn’t conceivable.”

Saturday’s shock gave way to rage, “and then rage crystallized into a very steely determination,” Mr. Bob says. “It’s the thing Israel’s enemies never fully understand. They think of Israel as a weak Western state, where people care about their looks and money and all the things that will make them flee rather than fight.” Hamas often scoffs that “the Jews love life.” But that’s why they fight for it.

“ Hamas was playing the long game,” Mr. Bob says. “ Probably after the 2021 war”—in which Israel delivered it a beating—“ Hamas diagnosed everything we did and took notes and started to plan.” When Israel next fought in Gaza, with Islamic Jihad, Hamas stayed out. Then, having lulled Israel, it executed a devastating plan.

“ They fire 2,000 rockets in one day. They’d never fired that many rockets at once,” Mr. Bob says. But it was all a diversion. While Israel focused on the unprecedented barrage, Hamas deployed men on “ motorized hang gliders, which were not even on our radar [as a threat], and dropped makeshift bombs on our lookouts. So, when they start sending people to the border fence, we’re blind. . . . They attack the big border crossings first, so we send reinforcements there, which means we leave the other spots open. We don’t realize that our lookouts are dead or blown up because we’re thinking about the rockets and they’re attacking everywhere at once.”

Each stage of the attack prepared the next, and each involved something new. “ In terms of military strategy, they schooled us.”

It wasn’t unreasonable for Israelis to think they had deterred Hamas, Mr. Bob says. “ But you need to plan for every eventuality.” That was the lesson of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which has become an Israeli metonym for military disaster. But Mr. Bob notes that war had a second half. “ By the end, Israel had in some ways an even greater tactical triumph than in ’67. It retook the Sinai, which became the basis of the peace agreement with Egypt.”

He sees a similar two-part story here. “ Hamas took its best shot and it won big on the first day,” he says. “ But it really doesn’t have anything else. It isn’t going to accomplish anything else close to what it has already done. From here on, it’s going to be Israel demolishing them.”

Israel has issued one of its largest military call-ups ever, 360,000 reservists. Its comprehensive bombing campaign and siege tactics are laying the groundwork for a counterinvasion to destroy Hamas. “ They decided that they need to get rid of the people who are running Hamas, and most of their military force, and most of their weaponry.” Mr. Bob says.

But as Aaron MacLean writes in Mosaic, “ Were the IDF simply to withdraw after a maximal campaign, the last surviving member of the Qassam Brigades will, as it were, grab a bloody Hamas flag, wave it for the cameras, and declare victory.” Gaza would still be fertile soil for terrorists.

That why’s regime change is on the table, too. Israelis used to worry that it might cost 1,000 soldiers to topple Hamas, and that ISIS could fill the vacuum. But by letting Hamas reign, Mr. Bob says, “ We’ve now lost 1,200 people,” and Hamas is no better than ISIS. “ So nobody has a hesitancy.”

That doesn’t mean Israelis want to govern Gaza themselves. “ I still think Israel feels that it would be more trouble, that more soldiers would die over a long period of time, and it would rather hand Gaza back to somebody else,” Mr. Bob says. But to whom? “ The Palestinian Authority was routed there in the past. Why wouldn’t that happen again? If multinational forces in Lebanon and the Sinai have shown that they’re incapable of protecting Israeli interests, why would this time be any different?”

Israel could turn to a hybrid solution, with autonomy for the Palestinian Authority, helped by a multinational group, and the Israeli military in some way involved to prevent a Hamas comeback. “ That is utter speculation on my part,” Mr. Bob says. “ No matter how hard you push it, officials right now are not hinting what their plans

are for afterward. I think it's because they haven't decided."

Perhaps unsure how to win the peace, Israel is focusing on total victory in the field. "Hezbollah is the strategic threat," Mr. Bob says, and a second front in the north would spell trouble. "Israel would win, but it would look different."

He says Israeli intelligence believes Hezbollah could fire 6,000 to 8,000 rockets a day early in a conflict, several times Hamas's capability. "If you're shooting down 90% of 2,000 rockets versus 90% of 6,000 or 8,000, it makes a huge difference. And probably the intercept rate drops to 80% because of the volume."

No Israeli leader would welcome that conflict, Mr. Bob says, even if it could generate a more decisive victory over the Iranian proxy network.

Hezbollah has fired on Israel and started cross-border skirmishes in the past week—"small things," he says. Israel has so far declined to escalate. "It'll kill whoever shot at it," and maybe the people around it, but that's it. "Clearly, Israel doesn't want to be distracted by another fight."

But the enemy has a say. Does Hezbollah want to fight? Mr. Bob thinks not. If it had been waiting "for the right moment to strike, it missed its chance" by holding back in the massacre's immediate aftermath, Mr. Bob says.

Instead, "Hezbollah has been as careful as Israel. It wants to be seen as having gotten on the playing field and drawn blood, . . . not being cowardly and staying out. But unless something changes, since Saturday it has basically been cowardly and stayed out." Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, "has a lot to lose," Mr. Bob says. "He basically controls a real country. I mean, Lebanon's a mess, but he has real power. It isn't Gaza."

Mr. Bob acknowledges that the situation is fluid, and new orders could always come down from Tehran. Ultimately, that's the point. Israelis may need to think big right now. "Israel will beat Hamas, but there's still going to be the larger problem of Iran," a revolutionary theocratic regime devoted to Israel's destruction.

The Obama and Biden administrations have assumed that the right combination of incentives can moderate Iran's ambitions. Surely, given a choice between prosperity and hardship, between fellowship and enmity, Iran would do the reasonable thing. It can be hard for Americans, who also love life, to understand a regime that chooses multigenerational sacrifice to make its dream of annihilating Israel come true.

"Iran is aggressively pushing Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah—anybody it can—to fight Israel, to make trouble with Israel, to destroy Israel. It's giving funding, logistics and training for that purpose," Mr. Bob says. Even if "nobody has been willing to go on the record and say, 'Iran gave the order on this day,' everybody would say that Iran's fingerprints are on the idea of it, which would happen at some point."

But perhaps the ayatollahs should have been careful what they wished for. "On Saturday, I think the Iranians are feeling great," Mr. Bob says. "But when they see how much damage Israel is going to do to Hamas in response, and proxies that they've invested so much in are going to lose most or all of their power, they're going to say, 'This wasn't worth it. These Israelis don't turn the other cheek.' "

Not only proxies will feel the pain. "The Mossad's abilities within Iran are astounding," Mr. Bob says, referring to the Israeli intelligence agency. He points to "multiple instances when Israel went into Iran, kidnapped top

Iranian officials, interrogated them within Iran, put the videos out, and then left the country without anybody knowing.” Mr. Bob’s years of “working to penetrate to top Mossad sources, all of the chiefs, and a lot of other people” lead him to conclude: “If the Mossad wants to go after someone in Iran, it can.”

Asked what Israel needs from the U.S. now, Mr. Bob rattles off four answers.

First, “give Israel bunker-buster bombs.”

Second, “declare that the U.S. won’t pressure Israel to prematurely halt its counterinvasion,” even as civilian casualties inevitably follow.

Third, “shoot down one Hezbollah or Hamas rocket to show that the U.S. is willing to lean into this, and the naval movements aren’t for show.”

Fourth, “move up delivery of the KC-46 refueling planes.”

It’s a plan of action whose meaning would be clear to Tehran. The bunker buster is a “dream weapon” for any potential strike on Iran’s underground nuclear facilities. Since Iran knows these bombs and KC-46 planes would “transform what Israel might be willing to risk,” he says, their transfer would make it think twice about ordering Hezbollah into the war.

“Do I really want my proxy to do X, Y or Z, which could lead to an overreaction?” he imagines Ayatollah Ali Khamenei asking. “The spectrum of those ‘overreactions’ that Israel could offer would be much greater. And that could affect Iran’s calculations in every zone.”

One effect would be to deter a sprint to a nuclear breakout, which some fear Iran will try while Israel is distracted. Iran “could get to the 90% weaponized uranium enrichment level in either days or a week and a half,” Mr. Bob says.

President Biden has been weak on Iran, but his support for Israel after Hamas’s invasion has been steadfast. Ophir Falk, a foreign-policy adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, praises Mr. Biden’s remarks Tuesday on the subject: “We’re cynical and everything, but it was one of the most moving speeches that I’ve ever heard.”

Israelis know all too well, however, how fickle the world’s sympathies can be. Half the point of the state of Israel is to free the Jews from dependence on those sympathies. “There was shock when people saw the pictures,” Mr. Bob says, “but that lasts for only so long.” Israel’s assault on Gaza will lead to “new pictures on the Palestinian side” and moral equivocation from the West.

That’s when Israel needs the U.S. to stand firm, because no one else will.

Mr. Falk says, “I truly hope, and I actually expect, that the civilized world will support us not only when we’re the victims, but also when we’re the victors here.” Victory might also save the prospects for a peace agreement with Saudi Arabia. “In this neighborhood, the strong survive,” Mr. Falk says. “The main reason that prior peace agreements were reached was because we’re strong.”

But if the peace plan goes by the boards, too bad. As Mr. Bob puts it, “This isn’t the Jew of the ghetto for 2,000 years. This is the modern Israeli army, which will do what it needs to do to defend the state.” Israeli society may be “richer and a little more spoiled now than it once was,” no longer the Jewish Sparta of the early days.

“But underneath, there’s a determination that should not be underestimated. That’s what I’ve seen the past few days. You’re going to see more of that.”

Elliot Kaufman is the Wall Street Journal’s letters editor.

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