

The Ordeal and Triumph of Mr. Netanyahu

By Victor Davis Hanson

After the October 7 massacres, the obituaries of the long political career of Benjamin Netanyahu, published both in Israel and in the West, became orthodox. He was considered as politically inert as Donald Trump once was after January 6, 2021.



The conventional wisdom speculated not if, but only when he would be forced out of office.

Western leaders and the Israeli left, and indeed even the Israeli non-left, as well as American and European pundits, claimed that the laxity of the Netanyahu government was entirely to blame for the grotesque massacre of October 7.

Indeed, last fall, there arose almost a competition of critics to assert all the ways in which Netanyahu was played by Hamas.

Accordingly, Netanyahu's sweeping Supreme Court reforms had supposedly needlessly split the country, demoralizing the military and eroding Israeli deterrence in the eyes of

Palestinian terrorists. Or his purported strategy of playing off the more lethal and toxic Hamas against the Palestinian Authority was supposedly proof of his reckless naivete. Still, other opponents argued that his 16 years as Israel's longest-serving prime minister and his age of 75 made him a Joe Biden-like relic of the past, simply too old and too familiar to be any longer effective. He was told it was well past time to step down and let a new generation break out of the old toxic Middle East mindsets.

And indeed, after October 7, Netanyahu faced a bleak regional and global landscape—analogueous to what a 65-year-old Churchill faced in June 1940 when all of Western Europe was in the hands of the Nazis and a lonely Britain was without a single wartime ally—with a sympathetic America still hesitant to commit to ensuring its existence.

Massive immigration from the Middle East into Europe and the United States—spiked by hundreds of thousands of oil-subsidized foreign students in Western universities, coupled with the post-George Floyd woke/DEI hysterias—had made European and American political parties unapologetically not just anti-Israel but now increasingly anti-Semitic as well.

Western governments at times seemed far more terrified of their own Muslim citizens, foreign residents, radicalized students, and left-wing activists of their political parties than they were of any terrorist threats emanating from Iran and its surrogates.

So, a shared sense of resignation, if not despair, had swept the West and, in part, Israel too. Armchair strategists and retired generals opined nonstop how it would be virtually impossible to root out Hamas from its vast subterranean labyrinths—given its armories and headquarters were buried deep below Gazan hospitals, schools, and mosques.

The West all but accepted Hamas propaganda that it was more immoral to root out Hamas murderers hiding beneath hospitals than it was for them to murder and then flee beneath them.

Hamas's own leaders were in no mood to negotiate a return of the hostages. They felt the more collateral damage their own fellow Gazans suffered, the more CNN-fed propaganda about Israeli "atrocities" and "genocide" would neuter the Netanyahu government. Hamas sensed Palestinians were to be the media's new Ukrainians—fellow underdogs deserving Western support.

The old friendship days of Donald Trump—the Abraham Accords, the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the institutionalization of an Israeli Golan Heights, the withdrawal from the Iran Deal, the crippling oil sanctions on Tehran, and the terrorist designation of the Houthis—were long gone.

In their place emerged the most anti-Israeli American government in memory. Biden-Harris soon put arms holds on Israel, hectored it to be proportionate in responding to some 500 projectiles launched by Iran against the Jewish homeland, and all but resonated the slurs of the left that Israel had become "genocidal."

By spring 2024, we were further told that Israel could not finally defeat Hamas or remove its leadership from their tunnels. Moreover, Israel also faced 100,000, 125,000, or perhaps even 150,000 Hezbollah ballistic missiles and rockets—along with the full arsenal of Iranian rockets, missiles, and drones—that were ready at last to swarm and destroy Israeli defenses.

So, Israel was hopelessly trapped, we were told, in a brilliantly devilish Iranian "ring of fire." Accordingly, Iranian appendages in the West Bank and Gaza, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon would wage an on-off again war of attrition against Israel.

Meanwhile, Iran would finalize the production of five or six nuclear bombs. Israel's civilian and military manpower would be worn down and worn out on multiple fronts and its tourist trade would be destroyed.

The economy would be bled out, as its citizens were ostracized

abroad and at home called up to military service. And its only patron, the once reliable U.S., now under the Biden-Harris administration, considered the Jewish state a near embarrassing election-year liability.

Such were the burdens that would supposedly crush Netanyahu as he was forced from office. These challenges would soon lead to a more “realistic” and compliant Israeli government that would stop the ground wars, not retaliate disproportionately against Hezbollah or Iran (“You got a win. Take the win” in the words of Joe Biden), and use the Biden administration as a neutral interlocutor to legitimize Hamas and thereby perhaps ransom the hostages for billions of dollars.

The more Israel knocked down incoming missiles, the more Biden urged them not to respond proportionally, as if to punish Israel for its competence and reward Iran for its ineptitude.

Indeed, not since the infamous days of the 1950s, when the CIA overthrew Latin American regimes, had America so brazenly interfered in the internal politics of a foreign nation as it now overtly sought to replace or undermine the Netanyahu government—by strategic leaks of shared classified information, slow-walking and suspending arms, threats of holding back financial aid, opening back-channel relations with its political opponents, and by nonstop loud jawboning.

Triumph

Yet here we are in autumn 2024, a year after October 7, with Hamas’s leadership virtually liquidated. Its terrorist brigades are decimated and increasingly scattered, and its own battered constituencies now angry that they are suffering the consequences of a self-interested—and, worst of all, losing—Hamis elite.

Hezbollah has launched some 9,000 rockets since October 7. It has made the Lebanese-Israeli border a no-man’s land. Some 80,000 Israelis were forced from their homes. Hezbollah violated all the UN peace accords and used UN deployments as

virtual shields. Middle East experts assumed that Hamas were amateur killers compared to Nasrallah's dreaded Hezbollah—the SS of Middle Eastern terrorist brigades.

Supposedly, its hardened killers, some 100,000 strong, could at any time trump the wickedness and medieval savagery of Hamas by sending at will far deadlier hit teams into northern Israel to repeat the massacres of October 7.

And what of Iran itself, the hub to the spokes of such terrorism?

We were told that it would soon become nuclear and might strike against the proverbial “one-bomb” state. In the mullahs' eyes, poor Israel was a divine gift to the theocracy of assembling half the world's Jewry into one easy target.

Did not Iran export deadly drones and missiles to new staunch allies like Russia and China and develop missiles nearly comparable to any in the West?

And yet somehow an embattled Netanyahu, shunned by the Biden administration, demonized by the European Union, and smeared and slandered by the UN, saw opportunity where all others saw only doom.

He understood that the sheer depravity of October 7 gave Israel, at least for a brief window, the moral authority to wage all-out war on its enemies, terrorists whose reputations he sensed were exaggerated, and their leaders' bloodcurdling threats thus mostly empty.

So, Israel systematically neutered Hamas, eliminating its leadership, destroying its tunnels, and warning civilians this time around to vacate buildings that served as armories, storehouses, and safe houses and thus would be leveled. And so they were.

As if out of some science fiction novel, years ago Israel booby trapped thousands of Hezbollah pagers and walkie-

talkies. And when they now finally exploded, they wounded or killed in a few seconds many of its ruling echelon while identifying the terrorists among the Lebanese population and revealing their strategic locations at the moments of their demise.

Netanyahu was told that reentering the Lebanese border was to revisit the graveyard of past failed Israeli incursions. And yet he did just that, though in measure, and thus half of the Hezbollah missile force is now reportedly gone. And with that, he pivoted to Iran.

Iran had sent 500 rockets, drones, and missiles into Israel, Israel heretofore launching a mere handful of missiles in response—until last week when the Israelis had apparently taken out much of the Iranian missile inventory and launch sites, as well as its anti-aircraft batteries.

So Israel without loss has finally retaliated against Iran in force, but in a geostrategically brilliant fashion that for now has taken few lives, avoided a regional war, and again put Iran in a nearly impossible strategic position—and all without further alienating an often hostile Biden administration.

If Iran does not match its murderous eliminationist rhetoric with a third strike, it will continue to lose face abroad and perhaps eventually even its governance at home. And yet Tehran realizes such humiliating quietude is the better of two bad choices, since Israel also gave it a way out, by killing few Iranians and sparing its oil and nuclear facilities.

On the other hand, if Iran foolishly chooses to send more ballistic missiles into Israel, there is a good chance that again few—if any—will get through. And such a third strike will both justify and indeed this time ensure that an unbound (and unstoppable) Israeli retaliation will destroy Iran's nuclear facilities and its oil infrastructure, rendering it destitute, defenseless, and humiliated—to the delight of the

Arab world, the U.S. and even Europe, and the indifference of its supposed allies China and Russia.

Moreover, Netanyahu struck before the election. That sent a message that even if Harris were to be elected, neither she nor Biden in the next few months will veto Israeli strategic options. (And the strike also reminded American voters that the current administration turned a calm Middle East into an inferno). All that said, Israel responded again with restraint, which the Biden-Harris will eagerly claim was due to their own humanitarian pressure.

In sum, Netanyahu has changed the very image of his multifarious enemies—and indeed of the Middle East terrorist himself. The myth of a deadly and inviolate Iran is now shattered, replaced by a neurotic theocracy, its terrorist limbs amputated, its homeland defenseless, and its ultimate fate in the hands of a righteously angry Israel—with the specter of a possible President Donald Trump on the horizon who would end the dangerous American strategic nonsense of promoting a theocratic, anti-Western, Persian/Shiite/underdog as a foil to the moderate Arabs and Israel.

Likewise, exploding pagers and walkie-talkies not only decimated Hezbollah, but it also humiliated it—and made it the butt of macabre global jest.

Targeted assassinations changed the image of the fiery terrorist Iranian, Hezbollah, or Hamas leader, shaking his fist and shouting death to Israel and the West to assembled thousands, into a caricature of a craven and quivering bully—screaming from a reinforced bunker about the unfairness of being on the receiving end of what it has so boastfully for decades dished out.

Western media weekly posts wanted poster-like charts of Iranian, Hezbollah, and Hamas leadership, with x's over the faces of the deceased. Now no sooner does a Hamas, Hezbollah,

or Iranian terrorist implode than there are hushed assumptions that no one wishes to publicly identify as his replacement—and thus join him in eternity

The surreal aspect of the Netanyahu retaliatory tour is that he has done more to neutralize European and American enemies—with decades of Western blood on their hands—than NATO, the CIA, the FBI, and Interpol combined, and yet more often received rebuke rather than gratitude.

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