

OPINION

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Understanding the True Nature of the Hamas-Israel War

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Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, during a visit to the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank in July. Credit...Alaa Badarneh/EPA, via Shutterstock



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The reason the Hamas-Israel war can be hard for outsiders to understand is that three wars are going on at the same time: a war between Israeli Jews and the Palestinians exacerbated by a terrorist group, a war within Israeli and Palestinian societies over the future and a war between Iran and its proxies and America and its allies.

But before we dig into those wars, here's the most important thing to keep in mind about them: There's a single formula that can maximize the chances that the forces of decency can prevail in all three. It is the formula that I think President Biden is pushing, even if he can't spell it all out publicly now — and we should all push it with him: You should want Hamas defeated, as many Gazan civilians as possible spared, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and his extremist allies booted, all the hostages returned, Iran deterred and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank reinvigorated in partnership with moderate Arab states.

Pay particular attention to that last point: A revamped Palestinian Authority is the keystone for the forces of moderation, coexistence and decency triumphing in all three wars. It is the keystone for reviving a two-state solution. It is the keystone for creating a stable foundation for the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab Muslim world. And it is the keystone for creating an alliance among Israel, moderate Arabs, the United States and NATO that can weaken Iran and its proxies Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis — all of whom are up to no good.

Unfortunately, as Haaretz's military correspondent, Amos Harel, [reported](#) on Tuesday, Netanyahu "is locked in by the [extreme right and the settlers](#), who are fighting an all-out war against the idea of any involvement of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza mainly out of fear that the United States and Saudi Arabia will exploit such a move to restart the political process and push for a two-state solution in a way that will require Israel to make concessions in the West Bank." So Netanyahu, "under pressure from his political partners, has banned any discussion of this option."

If Netanyahu is a captive of his political right, Biden needs to be very careful not to become a captive of Bibi. That is no way to win these three wars at once.

The first and most obvious of the three is the latest round of the century-long battle between two indigenous peoples — Jews and Palestinians — over the same land but now with a twist: This time the Palestinian side is not being led by the Palestinian Authority, which since Oslo has been committed to reaching a two-state solution based on the borders that existed before the 1967 war. It's being led by Hamas, a militant Islamist organization dedicated to eradicating any Jewish state.

On Oct. 7, Hamas embarked on a war of annihilation. The only [maps it carried](#) were not of a two-state solution but of how to find the most people in the Israeli kibbutzim and kill or kidnap as many of them as possible.

While I have no doubt that ending Hamas's rule in Gaza — something every Sunni Arab regime except Qatar is quietly rooting for — is necessary to give both Gazans and Israelis hope for a better future, the whole Israeli war effort will be delegitimized and become unsustainable unless Israel can do it with much greater care for the Palestinian civilians. The Hamas invasion and the rushed Israeli counterinvasion are unleashing a humanitarian disaster in Gaza that is only underscoring how much Israel needs a legitimate Palestinian partner to help govern Gaza in the morning after.

The second war, very much related to the first, is the struggle within the Palestinian and Israeli societies over their respective longer-term visions.

Hamas argues that this is an ethnic-religious war between primarily Muslim Palestinians and Jews, and its goal is an Islamic state in all of Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. For Hamas, it's winner take all.

There is a mirror image of Hamas's extremist views on the Israeli side. The Jewish supremacist settlers represented in Netanyahu's cabinet make no distinction between those Palestinians who have embraced Oslo and those who embrace Hamas. They see all Palestinians as modern-day descendants of the Amalekites. As [Mosaic magazine explained](#), Amalekites were a tribe of desert raiders mentioned often in the Bible who inhabited today's northern Negev, near the Gaza Strip, and lived by plunder.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that some Jewish settlers simply cannot stop talking about [rebuilding settlements in Gaza](#). They want a Greater Israel from the river to the sea. Netanyahu embraced these far-right parties and their agenda to form his government and now cannot banish them without losing his grip on power.

In each community, though, you also have those who see this war as a chapter in a political struggle between two nation-states, each with a diverse citizenry that believes in theory that the war does not have to be winner take all. They envision a partitioning of the land into a Palestinian state with Muslims and Christians — and even Jews — in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, which coexists peacefully alongside an Israeli state with its own mix of Jews, Arabs and Druze.

These two-staters right now are on the defensive in both communities in their struggle with the one-staters. Therefore, it is in the highest interest of the United States and all moderates to bring back the two-state alternative. That will require a reinvigorated Palestinian Authority that is cleansed of corruption and antisemitic incitement in its schoolbooks and that has reliable governing and security forces. This is where states like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, together with the United States, should get involved immediately.

Any two-state solution down the road is impossible without a credible, legitimate Palestinian Authority that Israel trusts to govern a post-Hamas Gaza and a West Bank. But that requires not only Israeli assent; it also requires Palestinians to get their act together. Are they up to it?

Victory in the third war is also impossible without that. That third war is the one that scares me the most.

It's the war between Iran and its proxies — Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Shiite militias in Iraq — against America, Israel and the moderate Arab states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the U.A.E. and Bahrain.

This war is not only about hegemony, raw power and energy sources but also about values. Israel, at its best, and America, at its best, represent the promotion of Western humanistic concepts of women's empowerment, multiethnic democracy, pluralism, religious tolerance and the rule of law — which are a direct threat to Iran's misogynist

Islamic theocracy, which demonstrates daily its ruthless willingness to jail or even kill Iranian women for not sufficiently covering their hair.

And while Arab allies of America and Israel are not democracies — and do not aspire to be — their leaders are all on a journey away from the old model of building legitimacy through resistance — resistance to Israel, to America, to Iran and Iranian-backed Shiites — and toward building their legitimacy on delivering resilience for all their people (through education, skills and growing environmental awareness) so they may realize their full potential.

That is not Iran's agenda. The raw power dimension is over who will be the hegemon, i.e. the big dog, in the region — Shiite Iran, tied to Russia and extending its reach to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, or Sunni Arab-dominated Saudi Arabia in a tacit alliance with Bahrain, the U.A.E., Jordan, Egypt and Israel and all backed by America. In this third war, Iran's goal is to drive the United States out of the Middle East, to destroy Israel and to intimidate America's Sunni Arab allies and bend them to its will.

In this war, America is projecting its power through our two aircraft carrier groups now stationed in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Iran is countering us with what I call landcraft carriers — a network of proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, the West Bank, Yemen and Iraq serving as platforms for launching rocket attacks on U.S. forces and Israel every bit as lethal as those from our aircraft carriers.

This third war started to escalate on Sept. 14, 2019, when Iran launched an audacious, unprovoked drone attack against two major Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. The Trump administration did nothing. “That was an attack on Saudi Arabia, and that wasn't an attack on us,” Donald [Trump said](#). On Jan. 17, 2022, Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi militia attacked the United Arab Emirates with missiles and drones, igniting a fire near the Abu Dhabi airport and setting off explosions in fuel trucks that killed three people. Again, no U.S. response.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that on Oct. 7, Hamas dared to launch its murderous attack on Israel's western border; shortly after, Iran's proxy Hezbollah began daily missile attacks along Israel's northern border, and the Houthis began launching drones at Israel's southern tip, seized a ship in the Red Sea and attacked two others.

I believe the chokehold that Iran's [Jew-hating](#) clerical regime is putting on Israel from the west, north and south is an existential threat to Israel. All Iran needs to do is have Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis launch one rocket a day at Israel, and tens of thousands of Israelis will refuse to go back to their homes along the border areas that are under fire. The country will shrink — or worse.

Consider the [research](#) of the Israeli economist Dan Ben-David, who heads the [Shoresh](#) Institution for Socioeconomic Research at Tel Aviv University. In a country of nine million people [where](#) 21 percent of Israeli first graders are ultra-Orthodox Jews, a vast majority of whom grow up with virtually no secular education, and an additional 23 percent are Israeli Arabs, who attend chronically poorly funded and poorly staffed

public schools, Ben-David noted, “fewer than 400,000 individuals are responsible for keeping Israel in the developed world.”

We’re talking about the top Israeli researchers, scientists, techies, cyberspecialists and innovators who drive the start-up nation’s economy and defense industries. Today, a vast majority are highly motivated and support the Israeli government. But if Israel cannot maintain stable borders or shipping lanes, some of these 400,000 will emigrate.

“If a critical mass of them decide to leave, the consequences for Israel will be catastrophic,” Ben-David said. After all, “in 2017, 92 percent of all income tax revenue came from just 20 percent of adults” — with those 400,000 responsible for creating the wealth engines that generated that 92 percent.

If Iran gets away with this, its appetite for squeezing any rival with its landcraft carriers will only grow. Israel can put up a strong fight and is capable of striking deep in Iran. But ultimately, to break Iran’s tightening stranglehold, Israel needs allies from the United States and NATO and the moderate Arab states. And the United States, NATO and the moderate Arab states need Israel.

But such an alliance will not come together if Netanyahu sticks with his policy of undermining the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank — essentially driving Israel and its seven million Jews into indefinite control of five million Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The pro-American forces in the region and Biden cannot and will not be party to that.

So I end where I began, only now I hope three things are totally clear.

1. The keystone for winning all three wars is a moderate, effective and legitimate Palestinian Authority that can replace Hamas in Gaza and be an active, credible partner for a two-state solution with Israel and thereby enable Saudi Arabia and other Arab Muslim states to justify normalizing relations with the Jewish state and isolating Iran and its proxies.
2. The anti-keystones are Hamas and Netanyahu’s far-right coalition, which refuses to do anything to rebuild, let alone expand, the Palestinian Authority’s role.
3. Israel and its U.S. backer cannot create a sustainable post-Hamas regional alliance or permanently stabilize Gaza while Netanyahu reigns as the prime minister of Israel.