

# If Israel Aspires to Life, It Must Change Its Approach to the Palestinians

*This handout picture released by the Israeli army on November 15, 2023, shows soldiers during a military operation around at Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City*Credit: AFP

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Israel invested nearly four billion shekels in building the underground barrier between it and the Gaza Strip, from Kerem Shalom in the south to the Zikim in the north. This was one of the largest engineering projects in Israeli history and took three and a half years to build. Six cement manufacturing facilities were built along the border just for this purpose. More than two million cubic meters of cement was poured dozens of meters deep in the earth, to the level of the groundwater – enough cement to “to build a road from Israel to Bulgaria,” the Defense Ministry said.

Building the [underground barrier](#), which was designed to thwart Hamas’ attempts to infiltrate Israel through tunnels, began in late 2017, after Hamas terrorists got into Israel through a tunnel opening up by Kibbutz Sufa in 2014. “If not for surveillance, we would have woken up to a killing spree on the kibbutz, and they would also unquestionably have attempted to commit kidnappings too,” the army told the media at the time.

Hamas’ decision to dig tunnels stemmed in part from Israel’s success in preventing all entry and egress from the Gaza Strip by means of two barriers – one code-named Hoovers A, which was erected following the Oslo Accord, and Hoovers B, which was built after the disengagement, plus another six-meter-high wall that was completed in tandem with the underground barrier in 2021.

These structures integrated advanced systems such as “See and Shoot,” a system comprising a camera and machine gun to enable observers to fire remotely at the press of a button. In 2019, Israel also built a sea barrier by the northern Gaza Strip to thwart infiltration from the sea, which comprised three parts: an submerged wall of boulders, a concrete wall lined with detectors and other systems, and barbed wire.

The barriers that Israel erected around the Gaza Strip on land, underground and at sea added to the defensive layers established against threats from Gaza from the air. The most famed is the Iron Dome missile interceptor system. Israel spent two billion shekels to develop and produce this system. Each interception costs 300,000 shekels.

Iron Dome didn’t exist yet during Operation Cast Lead in the winter of 2008, but has been heavily used in all of the clashes since. Another aerial threat to which Israel found a solution was the incendiary balloons that were launched from Gaza. In February 2020, a system called “Light Blade” was introduced. The Israeli police say the Blade is the first system of its kind in the world that can identify a balloon threat in flight, lock in on it and strike it with a laser.

Until October 7, 2023, Israel managed to defend itself from threats from Gaza, by doing the same thing over and over again. [It identified a threat from the sea and erected a barrier.](#) It identified a threat from the ground, and erected a barrier. It identified a threat from the air, and erected a barrier. It identified a threat from underground, and erected a barrier.

Based on the same logic, it also imposed a blockade, that lasted 16 years, on the 2.5 million Palestinians in Gaza. With the blockade in place, ships did not sail to or from Gaza, and flights did not arrive or depart. Overground departures from Gaza were limited to humanitarian cases, merchants and several thousand lucky laborers – groups whose numbers combined were the equivalent of about one percent of Gaza’s population.

[During these 16 years, Israel embarked on one military operation after another.](#) It pursued a policy of targeted assassinations, considered which items could and could not be permitted into Gaza to ensure that the population wouldn't starve, and rolled its eyes every time someone called Gaza an "open-air prison" (like David Cameron, when he was the British prime minister), or asserted that "the lives of children in Gaza are hell on earth" (UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres) or predicted that "within a few years, Gaza will become uninhabitable" (the 2017 UN report on the Palestinian territories).

*Smoke rises during an Israeli military bombardment of the northern Gaza Strip on November 15, 2023. Credit: FADEL SENNA - AFP*

However, whether in order to punish the Hamas government or out of a desire to perpetuate the policy of isolating Gaza from the West Bank, preserving the split between Hamas and Fatah and the diplomatic stalemate with the Palestinians – Israel was never prepared to consider altering its strategy in regard to Gaza.

[The blindness leading to the disaster of October 7](#) did not hinge on the way Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reacted to a specific warning that came from Egypt or the defense establishment. The blindness was in clinging to the flawed conception; the need to preserve, year after year, a status quo of a false and fragile "relative quiet" that always verged on disaster, in the belief that everything would turn out okay, that the intercept systems, barriers and lasers would do the job, while alongside Israel a prison-like enclave continued to deteriorate.

Whoever gave [the residents of the Gaza border communities](#) the false hope that their lives would be protected thanks to millions of cubic meters of underground concrete lied to them. The only chance these Israelis had, was for Israel to ensure that in Gaza, they would have reason to live too.

But Israel kept up the blockade on Gaza, because it wanted to maintain the separation between Gaza and the West Bank, and also because it didn't really know what to do with Hamas. Israel preferred Hamas to other alternatives, and at the same time wanted to look tough, not to appear weak versus Hamas, and chose not to strengthen it directly. This was the case whenever there was a possibility of talks, a hudna (truce) or prisoner exchange, with the exception of the Gilad Shalit deal.

At the same time, Israel's approach to the Palestinian Authority was similar. Israel did not want to appear weak versus Fatah or to directly strengthen the PA. Opposition to negotiations with the Palestinians became the bon ton of all the recent Israeli governments, spurring further political radicalization and despair in both the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinians' feeling was (and remains) that they don't count; that Israel does whatever it wants, including in the holy places in Jerusalem; that it is de facto annexing large sections of the West Bank and assembled a government with racist, Arab-hating ministers who long to wipe out Palestinian villages. Over the past decade and a half, a number of organizations have arisen that are devoted to encouraging Jews to ascend the Temple Mount – such as Beyadenu, Women for the Temple, Temple Mount Faithful, Returning to the Mount, and the Temple Mount Administration (and this is just a partial list). The number of Jews visiting the Temple Mount annually has steadily climbed from 5,000 to nearly 50,000.

*A young injured Palestinian boy lies on a mattress at the Al-Aqsa Hospital following the Israeli bombardment of in Deir el-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip on November 15, 2023. Credit: BASHAR TALEB - AFP*

The Palestinians, in both the West Bank and Gaza, watched the Palestinian issue – including all the core issues (Jerusalem, settlements, security, refugees, an independent state) steadily drop from the world's radar, and watched Israel establish facts on the ground that go completely counter to the Palestinian national interest.

The Palestinians also received the cold shoulder from the Arab world, which certainly added to the sense of isolation and contributed to radicalization. The leaders of Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates,

where most people identify with the Palestinians, signed normalization agreements with Israel with the mediation of an American president who sought to kill off the Palestinian question during his presidency.

They signed the agreements with the mediation of Donald Trump, who moved the American Embassy to Jerusalem, closed the Palestinian representation in Washington and proposed the “Deal of the Century,” which was essentially a political joke at the Palestinians’ expense.

More recently, the Palestinians felt the earth rumbling beneath their feet when Saudi Arabia – guardian of the Holy Places and regional leader – announced that, “with each passing day, we are getting closer to normalization with Israel” (September 20, 2023, two weeks before the Black Saturday onslaught).

There were apparently a number of reasons why Hamas launched its murderous assault on Israeli civilians and military targets on October 7, as Adam Shatz has pointed out in the British journal LRB. These apparently included a desire to put the blockade of Gaza back on the world’s radar, to thwart Israeli-Saudi normalization, to build popularity for the Palestinian struggle, to challenge PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas’ shaky rule, to drag Israel into Gaza and deal a decisive blow to its morale, to secure the release of Palestinian prisoners (especially after Hamas’ efforts to free Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the small number of Israeli captives and missing persons it held, had failed).

They wanted to arouse protest against what is happening in the West Bank, including settler violence and de facto annexation, and to call for a halt to the change in the status quo at the holy places in Jerusalem. It was this same religio-nationalist fundamentalism that led Hamas to fire missiles at Jerusalem in 2021 in reaction to the Flag March in the Old City, in an operation they called Saif al-Quds (“Sword of Jerusalem”). This time, the connection to the Holy Places was also preserved in the name Hamas gave to its violent assault: “Tufan Al Aqsa” (“Al Aqsa Flood”).

*Israeli soldiers by the barrier between Israel and Gaza* Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

Hamas might have launched its murderous assault – a criminal assault against civilians in their homes, including women and children, against drivers who tried to escape, and against people who had come to dance – even if the political situation were different. Hamas might have committed these horrific crimes even if Israel had signed one of the hudnas that were proposed in the 1990s;

Hamas might have committed this terrible assault even if there were no blockade, and even if Israel had negotiated with it for the release of the remains of Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul; it might have attacked even if Saudi Arabia hadn’t basically announced that it was ready to throw the Palestinian issue under the bus, as the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco did; and even if Israel hadn’t seen the growth of a religious messianism that promoted having Jews visit the Temple Mount in large numbers in order to poke a finger in the eye of the Palestinians and to demonstrate “governance.”

But while Hamas’ massacre of innocent civilians, of women and children, is impossible to grasp and impossible to explain, one obvious thing should be remembered: The Hamas movement became steadily more extremist as the blockade of Gaza persisted; during the years of the blockade the Palestinians had no political horizon, in either the West Bank or Gaza, not for Fatah supporters or Hamas supporters;

in the last two decades, Israel pursued a policy of isolating Gaza from the West Bank, and in the 16 years of the blockade, the situation in Gaza, including the physical and mental health situations, got worse. It’s quite possible that the people who perpetrated the assault never met an Israeli before in their lives, and they likely harbored a bottomless hatred for Israel and Israelis. The massacre may well have been their first time setting foot in Israel, their first time outside of Gaza.

Some 2.3 million Palestinians live in Gaza: 75 percent of them are classified as refugees, 50 percent are under age 18 and more than 8,000 (according to the Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza), many of them women and children, have been killed in the Israeli bombings following the October 7 assault. Israel wants revenge;

revenge on Gazans and Hamas, as though Hamas were an organization with a beginning and an end, and as if we haven't already taken revenge on Hamas time after time, and as though there is no ongoing blood conflict, and we haven't previously "made them pay a heavy price" for every Israeli killed (In Operation Cast Lead, 13 Israelis and 1,300 Palestinians were killed, and Hamas still "didn't learn their lesson").

Therefore, if there is a promise that should be made to those in Israel who lost that which is most dear to them – it is that we will not pour yet another ton of concrete into the ground and we will not keep on producing more systems to fire lasers at balloons, but rather will strive for a new status quo, that is stable and genuine and aspires to life.

We need to strive for a situation in which the Palestinians in Gaza won't want to dig an attack tunnel to Kibbutz Sufa, and won't dream of sending incendiary balloons toward Sha'ar Hanegev. We need to be ready to rethink the warped Israeli policy since the second intifada and particularly over the past 16 years. A political horizon and hope must be offered out of a genuine aim for compromise on all of the issues with the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah, or with true representative leadership of the Palestinian people, with the understanding that Hamas is not going to disappear.

Israel will have to climb down from the high and useless tree it has climbed. If it desires life, and not death, it must change its approach to the Palestinian issue, as well as the explanations it will have to provide internally – That this change of strategy is not because we "gave in" to Hamas, but because for the first time, we chose life.

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<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-15/ty-article-opinion/.premium/if-israel-aspires-to-life-not-death-it-must-change-its-approach-to-the-palestinians/0000018b-d290-d423-affb-f3b3aac60000>