

The New Israeli Rules of Engagement

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On the night of Oct. 6, 2023, the Israeli defense establishment realized something was stirring in Gaza but failed to act. Paralyzed by the fear of a miscalculation, these officials worried that if the Israel Defense Forces moved, fighting would result, and the coveted “quiet” of recent years would be shattered.

This was Israel’s state of mind before Oct. 7. The head of the Shin Bet, Israel’s domestic security service, compared it to a patient whose vital signs were in decline. Decades of containment, restraint and forbearance had made Israel slow to stir and vulnerable in appearance.

Two and a half years later, Israel stands at the pinnacle of its power in the Middle East. This transformation occurred only after it shed every rule it had gradually adopted in recent decades.

While the military’s official name is Israel Defense Forces, its most historic achievements involved preemptive strikes, such as in the 1967 Six-Day War. In more recent decades, Israel lost that offensive edge, and the army was forced into cumbersome urban warfare. The IDF leadership avoided retaliating against missiles fired from Iraq in the Gulf War in 1991, offered token responses to Hezbollah and Hamas in the 2000s, and so on. The terrible price of this defensive posture was revealed on Oct. 7.

These are the new rules of the game:

- The enemy exists in one of two states: pursuer or pursued. For years, Israel shied away from targeted killings, granting terror leaders and Iranian officials the time and peace of mind to plot against the Jewish state. The IDF’s new mindset is the exact opposite: If terrorists are running for their lives, they can’t make plans to take ours. There’s poetic justice in that Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the man behind alleged assassination attempts on Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu in the summer of 2024, was eliminated by them in the winter of 2026.
- When enemies announce their intention to destroy you, believe them. It isn’t election rhetoric (they don’t hold elections); it isn’t lip service or empty words. “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” are mission statements.
- Ignoring small security problems invites larger ones. Israel fled Gaza to avoid improvised explosive devices and shooting attacks, only to be attacked by two commando divisions

with the world's largest tunnel network at their disposal. It withdrew from Lebanon because it couldn't stomach 20 fallen soldiers a year; in exchange, Hezbollah entrenched itself on the border with a missile arsenal rivaled by few global powers.

- There can be no modus vivendi with terror organizations. Murderous ambitions can't be soothed with "gentlemen's agreements," international guarantees or economic incentives. Israel tried this in Gaza, and the result was catastrophic.
- When you respond, overwhelm your foe. For years, the enemy fired rockets and Israel replied with "proportional" force. This normalized the firing on civilians, kidnapping and invasion. But this changed after Oct. 7. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah thought he was still playing by the old rules, launching a few rockets daily. It ended with his elimination, the decapitation of his organization, and the destruction of 80% of their missile stockpile.
- Fundamentalists accumulate weapons to use them, not to deter. For years, Israel ignored the vast ammunition depots in Gaza and Lebanon under the assumption they would simply "rust." They didn't.
- When you are on the strong side, the enemy is the one who should fear a miscalculation.

The new rules are in effect in the operation launched on Saturday. The Jewish state can't accept the existence in Iran of production facilities and thousands of ballistic missiles, with every launch sending half of Israel into shelters and threatening mass casualties. It can't tolerate a regime that continues, even today, to fund its greatest enemies with more than a billion dollars annually.

President Trump's decision to join Israel in striking Iran proves that good ideas are infectious. Barack Obama truly believed the Iranians could be appeased with economic benefits. Bill Clinton made peace with a violent North Korea and received a nuclear North Korea in return. Joe Biden pushed for agreements that would have left Hamas as the sovereign ruler of the entire Gaza Strip.

Contrary to the isolationist instincts of parts of the MAGA movement, Mr. Trump understood that Iran is a danger to regional and world peace. Iran's attacks on peaceful Gulf states and Cyprus show what they would have done had they been allowed to develop nuclear weapons. This war will save us from the necessity of many others. The entire world now sees what happens to those who spent 47 years shouting "Death to

America” and “Death to Israel,” only to discover suddenly that America and Israel were finally listening—and taking notes.

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