

OPINION

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Netanyahu Is Making Israel Radioactive

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Abir Sultan/Reuters



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Israel today is in grave danger. With enemies like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran, Israel should be enjoying the sympathy of much of the world. But it is not. Because of the way Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his extremist coalition have been conducting the war in Gaza and the occupation of the West Bank, Israel is becoming radioactive and diaspora Jewish communities everywhere increasingly insecure.

I fear it is about to get worse.

No fair-minded person could deny Israel the right of self-defense after the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 killed some 1,200 Israelis in one day. Women were sexually abused, and children were killed in front of their parents and parents in front of their children. Scores of abducted Israeli men, women, children and elderly people are still being held hostage in terrible conditions, now for more than 150 days.

But no fair-minded person can look at the Israeli campaign to destroy Hamas that has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza, about a third of them fighters, and not conclude that something has gone terribly wrong there. The dead include thousands of children, and the survivors many orphans. So much of Gaza is now a wasteland of death and destruction, hunger and ruined homes. Urban warfare brings out the absolute worst in people, and that is certainly true for Israel in Gaza. This is a stain on the Jewish state.

But Israel is not alone in creating this tragedy. The stain on Hamas is black as well. This Islamist militia started the conflict on Oct. 7 without any warnings, protections or shelters for Gazan civilians, and it did so knowing full well from experience that Israel would respond by bombing Hamas strongholds tunneled under homes, mosques and hospitals. Hamas showed a total disregard for the lives of Palestinians, not just Israelis. But Hamas was already branded as a terrorist organization. It is not a U.S. ally and never claimed to practice purity of arms.

All of that said, Israel's standing in the world could take another very big hit soon because of something that made me wary of its invasion from the very start: Netanyahu has sent the Israel Defense Forces into Gaza without a coherent plan for governing it after any Hamas dismantling or cease-fire.

In my view, there is only one thing worse for Israel, not to mention Gazans, than a Gaza controlled by Hamas: That's a Gaza where nobody is in charge, a Gaza where the world will expect Israel to provide order but Israel cannot or will not, so it becomes a permanent, grinding humanitarian crisis.

My own recent visit to the Gaza border suggested to me that that is exactly where we're headed. On March 2, I accompanied the U.S. Centcom commander, Gen. Michael Kurilla, on his visit to the Erez crossing point between Israel and Gaza. Kurilla was in charge of the U.S. humanitarian food airdrop that was about to take place.

With the sound of drones buzzing overhead and the distant rumble of artillery, a local Israeli commander explained that most Israeli forces in northern Gaza, which includes its largest urban area, Gaza City, had pulled back either to the Israeli border area or along the road that divides Gaza from north to south. Henceforth, another senior Israeli officer

told me, Israeli troops and special forces would go in and out of northern Gaza only to strike at specific Hamas threats, but basically no one was providing day-to-day governance for the civilians left behind, save for a few hundred Hamas fighters and local gang leaders.

I immediately understood how a chaotic scene unfolded over food distribution two days earlier. Israel is breaking Hamas's control yet refusing to take responsibility with its own forces for civilian administration in Gaza — and refusing to enlist the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, which has thousands of employees in Gaza, to perform that task. It is behaving this way because Netanyahu does not want the P.A. to become the Palestinian government in the West Bank and Gaza, which might give it a chance at credibility to grow into an independent Palestinian state there one day.

In other words, Israel has a prime minister who apparently would rather see Gaza devolve into Somalia, ruled by warlords, and risk Israel's military gains in dismantling Hamas than partner with the Palestinian Authority or any legitimate, broad-based, non-Hamas Palestinian governing body — because his far-right cabinet allies, who dream of Israel controlling all the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, including Gaza, will oust him from power if he does.

Netanyahu's government is apparently hoping to enlist local Palestinian clan leaders to post-Hamas Gaza, but I seriously doubt that will work. Israel tried and failed that strategy in the West Bank in the 1980s, as these locals were often stigmatized as collaborators and never gained governing traction.

I confess that as I contemplated all of this from the border, I had two flashbacks that were sort of daytime nightmares.

The first was remembering how the U.S. invaded Iraq with the aim of building a new democratic order to replace Saddam Hussein's tyranny, which I supported. But when it came to implementation, the Bush administration broke the Iraqi Army and the ruling Baath Party with no coherent plan for creating better alternative governance. This turned many anti-Hussein Iraqis against the U.S. and created the conditions for the anti-U.S. insurgency.

I summarized all of this in a column published on April 9, 2003. It was 20 days after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and I had entered the country with a team from the Kuwaiti Red Cross that was delivering medical supplies to the main hospital in the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr. There were three things I noticed almost immediately: how few U.S. or allied troops were around keeping order, what chaos this was producing and how sullen the people were. I wrote it this way:

It's hard to smile when there's no water. It's hard to applaud when you're frightened. It's hard to say, "Thank you for liberating me," when liberation has meant that looters have

ransacked everything from the grain silos to the local school, where they even took away the blackboard. ... It would be idiotic to even ask Iraqis here how they felt about politics. They are in a prepolitical, primordial state of nature. For the moment, Saddam has been replaced by Hobbes, not Bush.

I added that I had gone in with members of a Kuwaiti relief team, “who, taking pity on the Iraqis, tossed out extra food from a bus window as we left. The Umm Qasr townsfolk scrambled after that food ... jostling for breadcrumbs. This was a scene of humiliation, not liberation. We must do better.”

I concluded: “America broke Iraq; now America owns Iraq, and it owns the primary responsibility for normalizing it. If the water doesn’t flow, if the food doesn’t arrive, if the rains don’t come and if the sun doesn’t shine, it’s now America’s fault. We’d better get used to it, we’d better make things right, we’d better do it soon, and we’d better get all the help we can get.”

Flashback No. 2: It is May 22, 2018, and I am writing near the Gaza border with Israel a column that would be titled “*Hamas, Netanyahu and Mother Nature.*” Relying on data from Israeli and Palestinian environmentalists, I wrote about how — because of Hamas’s mismanagement of the Gaza economy and diversion of building materials to dig tunnels to penetrate Israel — Gaza was suffering a critical shortage of infrastructure, particularly sewage treatment plants. So Gazans were dumping about 100 million liters of raw sewage into the Mediterranean every day.

Why should Israelis care? After all, Gaza is “over there,” behind a fence. Meet Mother Nature. Because of the prevailing current in the Mediterranean, most of Gaza’s untreated sewage dumped into the Mediterranean flowed northward to the Israeli beach town of Ashkelon, the site of Israel’s second-largest desalination plant. Eighty percent of Israel’s drinking water comes from desalination and 15 percent of its drinking water from that Ashkelon plant alone.

As a result of Gaza’s floating waste, that Ashkelon desalination plant had to close several times to clean Gaza’s gunk out of its filters.

Israelis and Palestinians are interdependent. Lost there, felt here. The only question is whether they can one day forge a healthy interdependency or will be doomed to an unhealthy interdependency. But interdependent they will be. Each community needs a leader whose actions are motivated by that fundamental truth. Right now, neither has one.