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Israel's new Yom Kippur

OCTOBER 11, 2023 AHRON BREGMAN

For Israelis, the October 1973 national trauma is being revisited in October 2023.



Israeli soldier kneels down to pray in the sand during the Yom Kippur War. Credit: Trinity Mirror / Mirropix / Alamy Stock Photo



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Egypt and Syria invaded the Sinai and Golan Heights, lands Israel had seized in 1967, catching the Israelis by surprise and off guard on their Day of Atonement. In the South, 100,000 Egyptian troops crossed the Suez Canal in small dinghies, used water jets to make massive holes in the Israeli Bar-Lev line of defence, breached it, and advanced into the desert. Facing them, on the Israeli side, inside the Bar-Lev line, were only 452 troops. In the north, Syrian troops moved deep into the occupied Golan and seized one third of it from the overwhelmed Israelis. The fiftieth anniversary of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War coincides with the current catastrophic event in Israel, which is still unfolding, in which Hamas, the militant Palestinian Islamist movement that rules the Gaza Strip, launched a massive commando military strike, catching the Israelis, just as in 1973, unprepared and off guard. The date of the attack is not accidental. For Israelis, the October 1973 national trauma is being revisited in October 2023.

The Palestinian attackers emerged from the Gaza Strip. Wedged between Israel and the Mediterranean Sea, the Gaza Strip is relatively small: forty kilometres long and between 6.4 and twelve kilometres wide. As a consequence of the 1948 War between Israel and its Arab neighbours, a massive influx of Palestinian refugees moved into the area which radically altered the composition of the Strip's population. Up until 1948 the dominant people in the Gaza area were the indigenous Gazans, totalling around 80,000 and led by a small but wealthy elite of landowning families. But the arrival of 200,000 refugees fleeing the war in Palestine, transformed this reality overnight; the newcomers settled in makeshift camps, often in the orchards dotted around Gaza. During that war, Egyptian forces moved into the Gaza Strip, occupied it, and imposed a military regime.

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refugees, crossed into Israel, and attacked its people, mainly in the small villages adjacent to the Strip. Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, said on one occasion that he wished the Gaza Strip would 'disappear under the sea'.

On the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War, the Israeli Defence Minister, Moshe Dayan, instructed his military forces that they should not occupy the Gaza Strip from the Egyptians, as the place is 'bristled with problems... a nest of wasps'. It is a place which Israel must not occupy, he warned, if it did not want to get stuck with a quarter of million Palestinian refugees. Overlooking Dayan's instructions, Israeli forces occupied the Gaza Strip anyway. For the next 38 years, Israel stayed in the Strip, building settlements, setting up military bases, and imposing military rule on the area and its people.

The Oslo Peace Process in the 1990s between Israel and Palestinian leadership, then under Yasser Arafat of the Fatah faction, led to partial Israeli withdrawal from the Strip. In 2005, when the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks stalled, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided that the presence of some 8,000 Jewish settlers in the Strip, squeezed among 1.8 million hostile Palestinians, was untenable and he decided to pull out, unilaterally, from Gaza. After the Israelis left, Hamas, helped by Iran, armed itself to the teeth and, in 2006 it won local elections, kicked out the remaining Fatah officials and started ruling the Gaza Strip. Officially, and like many other nations, Israel continued to regard Hamas as a terrorist organisation, but, on the ground, it accepted it and even strengthened it so that it could efficiently compete with the Fatah leadership. Playing one branch of the Palestinian movement against the other, went the Israeli thinking, could weaken the Palestinian movement, and prevent it from establishing a Palestinian state. While Israel and Hamas would clash every now and then, Israel never attempted to topple the organisation, fearing that without Hamas

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Over time, however, Hamas became restless. Israeli troops were no longer physically on the ground in the Strip, but Palestinian life had been totally dependent on Israeli goodwill – if Israel wanted to turn off the lights in Gaza, then they could just switch them off. If Israel wanted to stop labourers from Gaza getting into Israel, all they had to do was to keep the gates into Israel shut, which in turn would negatively affect the Strip's economy leading to Palestinian criticism of the Hamas leadership.

Also, in competition with Palestinian leadership on the West Bank, Hamas was keen to impress on fellow Palestinians that Hamas did more than the West Bank leadership to fight the Israeli occupation. Fighting the Israelis, however, was not an easy matter. Hamas had long used rockets as a means of taking the war to Israel, but their impact was neutralised by the Iron Dome, an effective defence system invented by the Israelis which could intercept Hamas's rockets.

Additionally, reports of US attempts to broker a peace deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia concerned Hamas, as they felt they were being abandoned by Arab governments; so, went Hamas' thinking, if it attacked Israel and the latter responded and killed many innocent Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, then the Saudis would find it difficult to sign with Israel.

As for Israel: the current Netanyahu government, the most extreme in Israel's history, with militant settlers holding key governmental positions, added to Hamas's frustration by accelerating the building of settlements in Palestinian areas on the West Bank. Disruptive members of the Netanyahu government, notably the two settlers, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Internal Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, had been busy aggravating relations with the Palestinians.

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judiciary. This, in turn, led to massive demonstrations in Israel and open declarations by military reservists that they would refuse to serve in the military if the government proceeded with the reforms.

These elements, namely Palestinian frustrations, competition between different Palestinian factions, and the perception within Hamas that Israel was vulnerable, led to its decision to launch its largest surprise attack in decades.

More than 1,500 Hamas gunmen crossed into Israel by sea and air, but their main thrust was on land. They brought in bulldozers and flattened parts of the sophisticated six-metre-high fence, which was equipped with electronic sensors and other advanced devices that Israel had built, at huge expense, around the Gaza Strip. Israel boasted that their fence was impenetrable, but like the Bar-Lev line of defence which collapsed in 1973, it was easily breached where attacked by Hamas. Using GPS and riding on motorbikes and trucks, well-trained Hamas commando gunmen rode the short distance into 22 Israeli villages, towns, and army bases.

This military operation was not one carried out on the spur of the moment. It was hatched over months, in great secrecy and probably with Iranian support. Hamas copied the Hezbollah plan which was aimed at crossing the Lebanese border with Israel, entering Israeli settlements, and taking civilian prisoners. Israel knew about the Hezbollah plan and prepared itself for such an eventuality, but no such preparations were done in the south, as it never occurred to the Israelis that Hamas might adopt Hezbollah's plan.

When the gunmen reached their targets, they broke into houses, dragged inhabitants out into the streets and shot them in cold blood. On some occasions, when Israelis locked themselves up inside their houses to protect themselves,

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gathered to celebrate, ambushed them, and killed at least 260 with gun fire and hand grenades. On this tragic day – 7 October – more than 1000 Israelis were killed and 3,000 injured; Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another Palestinian militant organization, also abducted into the Gaza Strip more than 130 Israelis – children, women, men – which they would keep as bargaining cards to negotiate with Israel a future release of Palestinian prisoners locked up in Israeli jails.

In the Yom Kippur War, as is the case now, the Israelis had enough intelligence indicating that the enemy was planning an attack; neither in 1973, nor in 2023 was there any lack of information. In both cases, however, a set of beliefs – ‘conceptions’, as it is known in Israel – led the Israelis to ignore the hard facts and stick to a false set of beliefs. In 1973, it was that the Arabs were as bad at fighting as they had been in 1967, and that if they did attack then the IDF could easily stop them. In 2023, the Israeli held that Hamas did not want war, it was not strong enough, and if only Israel allowed more Palestinian labourers to take up jobs in Israel, then this would calm Hamas down. In both cases Israel got it wrong.

What compounded the Israeli catastrophic intelligence failure was the fact that, when Hamas did attack, there was hardly any significant Israeli force to stop it. As in 1973, the line of defence was much too thin, since, not expecting a Hamas attack, the military command diverted troops to the West Bank to protect Jewish settlers and their illegal settlements and separate Palestinian from extremist Jewish groups stirring up trouble in the West Bank. Worse still, the IDF has a special commando brigade composed of special units – Duvdevan, Egoz, Maglan – whose mission is to move fast by helicopters to reinforce existing forces during surprise attacks; for some reason these forces failed to arrive on time to tackle the invading Hamas gunmen. The Israeli victims begged

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to be seen.

Clearly, when the dust settles, these catastrophic intelligence and operational failures will be properly investigated and probably be put right, and lessons will be learned. But no investigation could erase the national trauma which is now added to the list of past Jewish and Israeli traumas.

I was nine years old, growing up in Israel, when it occupied the Gaza Strip, and other Arab lands, in just six days in June 1967, and I can still remember the euphoria of the great military victory. Six years later, on 6 October 1973, at two o'clock in the afternoon, the 1967 euphoria crashed to the ground when Arab armies invaded the Sinai and Golan. I will never forget the appearance of Defence Minister, Moshe Dayan, on our black-and-white TV screen: defeated, his head bowed and his voice trembling, he told us that our troops at the two fronts were fighting an invading enemy and that 'we are fighting for our lives'. In subsequent years, the Yom Kippur trauma continued to deeply affect our collective life, as losing close to 3,000 young men touched upon every corner of the then small Israeli community.

Now, fifty years later, a new trauma has emerged, far worse than Yom Kippur. In 1973, despite the failure at the opening phase of the war, Israeli forces, when fully mobilised, managed to hit hard at the invading forces, crossing the Suez Canal into Africa, stopping 101 kilometres from Cairo and also pushing the Syrians back. The fighting itself was far away from home, taking place in the Sinai desert and on the Golan Heights, occupied areas, but not part of sovereign Israel. By contrast, the current incident took place on Israeli territory and inside Israeli villages and towns; the last time the enemy entered Israeli villages was back in the 1948 War of Independence. To see Hamas gunmen walking freely inside Israeli residential areas, smoking, joking, dragging women and children,

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were shot by guns fire while celebrating in a desert music festival are almost impossible to watch. And then the heart breaking story of a young Israeli lady who opened her Facebook page only to find a clip of her grandmother in a pool of blood. It emerges that the Hamas gunman who shot her, took her phone, filmed her dying, and then uploaded the clip to Facebook. Such horrific stories of death and survival keep coming. This helplessness of Israeli citizens who, for years, trusted the IDF to protect them in such eventualities is difficult to comprehend. My 92-year-old mother who has lived through all of Israel's wars from 1948 to now keeps asking me, 'Where are our troops? Where is the IDF which has always protected us?'

Israel is a nation in mourning. Anger, panic, fear, and bewilderment combine with horrific pictures of the dead and injured, circulating by social media, to create a trauma which will linger and continue to haunt, not only the families of the dead, injured and abducted, but the whole nation.

Israel will hit back – and hard. It has got to do so. A nation cannot afford to lose hundreds of its citizens in a single day and do nothing about it. A nation which strives to live in the sometimes-difficult Middle East cannot afford to show weakness or allow such breach of its sovereignty. Even given a reality of injustice and suffering of Palestinians, the brutal killing which we have just witnessed is totally unacceptable in a civilized world. 'Hitting back' in a Middle Eastern context always has in it the eye-for-an-eye element, a sort of an undeclared revenge for wrongdoing. But, for Israel, hitting back is also necessary in order to deter other enemies, notably Hezbollah, whose combatants, riding on motorbikes, constantly patrol the Israeli-Lebanese border where Israeli villages are adjacent to the border-fence. Hezbollah might try to repeat the successful Hamas attack.

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then went after Saddam Hussein of Iraq, which resulted in American troops getting stuck in a terrible, senseless war in Iraq from where they only withdrew after more than seven years, leaving behind a terrible mess.

What does 'overdoing' mean for Israel in the current context? An example is imposing siege on the Gaza Strip, cutting off electricity, water, and food. If Israel goes down this route it will, very quickly, lose its international support and outpouring of sympathy. Another example of 'overdoing it' would be turning the Gaza Strip into a modern Dresden. The Israeli Air Force is very powerful, equipped with massive one-tonne bombs. If it wants, it could flatten whole neighbourhoods in the Gaza Strip, causing physical damage and also hundreds, perhaps thousands, of casualties. Finally, invading the Strip in order to topple the Hamas regime could be a mistake the Israelis might regret. Getting rid of the brutal Hamas government is perhaps tempting but removing them without handing over the keys to someone else would leave the Gaza Strip in total chaos and be counter-productive for the Israelis. If the Israelis decide to remove Hamas and stay there to run the place, they will have to face 2.2 million hostile Gazans.

Big dilemmas and dramatic moments now face many in the Middle East, particularly Israel. Such events as the ones we are now witnessing are often game-changers, but at this point in time, it is difficult to see the direction of potential changes. One could only hope that some good will emerge from this horrific tragedy. One thing is sure which is that the trauma caused by Hamas's senseless and brutal attack on innocent civilians in southern Israel is likely to remain on the Israeli psyche for at least as long as the Yom Kippur trauma.

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AUTHOR

Ahron Bregman

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