

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / If Not This, Then What Should Israel Do?

From New York Times Opinion, this is the Ezra Klein Show.

So on Friday, Israel began its ground war in Gaza.

They cut all cellular communications for 34 hours, creating chaos not just for Hamas, but for the vast majority of the more than 2 million Palestinians who live in Gaza.

I found this line in the New York Times pretty tough.

Quote, they had no way to know whether their loved ones were alive or dead.

Emergency phone lines stopped ringing.

Desperate paramedics tried to save people by driving toward the sound of explosions.

Wounded people were left to die in the street.

Imagine hearing or seeing an explosion not far from you and not being able to call your relatives who live there.

Palestinian health officials say that more than 8,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed since October 7th.

And I want to note here that there is a fog of war.

It is possible these numbers are wrong.

It is also, of course, possible that particularly by the end of this, these numbers will be much higher. But if you take something like the 8,000 numbers right, well, then one way the horror of October 7th was driven home.

One way its scale was driven home to Americans was to put it in terms of 9-11s.

Adjusting for population, Joe Biden said it was like 15 9-11s.

If you take that same math, then Gaza's experience so far around 400 9-11s.

What does that do to a population?

Something on my mind right now for obvious reasons is protests against Israel have broken out all over the world.

Anti-Semitism is searching across the Chinese Internet a state-run media that blames the United States for, quote, blindly backing Israel.

In Dagestan, a majority Muslim Republic in southern Russia, dozens were arrested after storming an airport hunting for people who had arrived on a flight from Tel Aviv.

At Cornell University, the Jewish Center was under guard after threats of violence.

A few blocks away from me, the synagogue I take my children to on weekends was spray-painted.

I took my kids to the park over the weekend was rerouted because the streets were closed for anti-Israel protests.

My kids kept excitedly running to the window of our home to watch the lines of police marching past to keep order.

And I'm not convinced this will make Israel safer.

I fear it'll be just the opposite.

I don't believe the punishment being needed out on ordinary Gazans is moral or is justified.

But I also recognize criticism is easy, and I don't live in Israel or in Gaza.

And so there's been this void, I think, at the heart of a lot of coverage, mine included.

What should Israel have done?

What should they do?

If not this, then what?

Zach Beecham is a senior correspondent at Vox, and he's covered Israel extensively in recent years.

And so he stood out to answer that exact question, and he spoke with character-terrorism experts and military historians and experts on Hamas.

And I found his piece, What Israel Should Do Now, one of the best I've read since October 7th, one of the one's most clarifying.

And so I asked him to join me on the show.

And I should note, because things are changing so quickly, that Zach and I spoke on Thursday, October 26th.

And a lot has happened since then, but nothing, I think, that changes the analysis here.

As always, my email is reclinedshow at nytimes.com.

Zach Beecham, welcome to the show.

Hey, Ezra, it's great to be here with you.

So I wanted to start with something you wrote, which is that two things are true.

Israel must do something, and what it's doing now is indefensible.

And I want to take them in turn.

So first, why must Israel do something?

I spent a lot of time thinking about this question, right?

Because it seems like the big demand from a lot of people who are critics of Israel is just you should have a ceasefire.

They should stop doing what they're currently doing.

I heard this from Palestinians I spoke with.

The problem with that from the Israeli point of view is that the massacre of October 7th represented not just a breach of security, but a signal collapse in the state's capacity to provide for the security of the Israeli people.

They can't live in a world where they think this kind of thing would happen again or might happen again.

I think about a conversation I had with Stav Shafir, who is a former member of the Knesset, Israel's parliament from the Labour Party, which was a long time stalwart of the Israeli left. She's a peacenik, right?

Her view for a long time has been two states.

Her politics are very focused on inequality inside Israel, right?

Real, not like of the far left, but left wing Israeli person.

When I spoke to Stav, the palpable pain and fear in her voice and anger and the understanding of what Hamas was after this attack as being a monstrous, intolerable threat to Israel, she told me we need to destroy Hamas.

No qualifiers.

She was like, we can't live next to them anymore.

And when you hear that kind of thing from somebody who is a Muslim, we can't live next to them anymore.

And when you hear that kind of thing from somebody who is so affiliated with the left side of the Israeli political spectrum, it gives you a real insight into the way in which Israelis of all stripes have unified around a need to do something, something really, really dramatic about the Hamas threat.

This can never be tolerated again from their point of view.

It speaks to the heart of what Israel is as a country in their mind, right?

From their point of view, Israel exists because Jews were insecure elsewhere. Jews needed their own country with a strong army to be able to protect themselves from this kind of massacre.

And if civilians can be killed in such horrific ways, the state has failed. And it needs to do something to show that it hasn't been a failure.

And an expert on Israeli politics told me this point blank. No ceasefire and no return to the status quo.

Something needs to change.

What that is, that's less clear.

But what we do know is that that needs to be pretty dramatic.

Let's hold for a second on the question of a ceasefire, because as you say, that's become a demand.

It is not going to happen at the moment.

No.

To some degree, I almost think the meta conversation of a ceasefire is whether you are allowed to call for one in American politics without being sidelined.

But would one be a good idea?

I think a temporary ceasefire for the provision of humanitarian aid is very defensible, right?

The situation in Gaza is absolutely dire on humanitarian terms.

And something needs to be done to deal with the spread of infectious disease, the lack of water.

I mean, it's truly horrifying.

At the same time, though, Israel hasn't done enough to deal with the problem that Hamas creates.

So then let me take the other half of your formulation.

What is it doing now?

And why do you call what it's doing now, which is the beginning of what it's doing, indefensible?

So I think there's one really obviously indefensible component, which is the cutoff of electricity, fuel, and water supplies to Gaza.

This amounts to collective punishment of civilians.

I mean, there's really no definition of the morality of war under which one can say, you can do that to people.

And if you look at any dispatch from the ground in Gaza, and you look and you engage with the human toll and suffering going on, you really understand that what Israel is doing is hurting really, really hurting innocent people, children, even for no good reason.

There are a lot of significant problems with its bombing campaign as well.

There are questions about how discriminated it's being in target selection and what targets it's choosing.

But in general, I think sort of the bigger picture is it's not clear what Israel wants to get out of the current offensive.

Like their stated objective is to defeat Hamas.

It's not clear what that means based on the current rhetoric, and it's not clear if the current bombing contributes to it.

And if you're going to inflict this level of suffering on civilians, even unintentionally, or as a byproduct of legitimate tactics, you need to have a real endpoint.

You need to know what you're doing.

In what you have read or heard or in your reporting has been an articulated goal of the siege specifically.

I have never seen any defense from anyone of the siege that makes sense in my mind, right?

The horrible justifications that you hear from some Israeli leaders are things like, honestly, comparing the resonance of Gaza to human animals or saying something like that, right? You've heard versions of that language twice from Israeli leaders.

From the defense minister.

Right.

Now, it sounded like he was referring to Hamas, but others.

But he was specifically talking about the siege.

That's what unnerved me about that statement.

If he said human animals and he means Hamas, fine.

But when what precedes it is we're cutting off food and water and electricity.

That's clearly not just from Hamas.

No, it just isn't reasonable.

It's worse than that.

It is an incredible amount of anger being unleashed on civilians who are basically themselves held captive by Hamas.

Hamas is contrary to what you may hear from some Israelis, not popular.

People don't like living under an authoritarian, theocratic regime.

It's just very, very difficult to rebel and overthrow government.

There are things that people like about Hamas as well.

There are certain social services it provides.

They like that unlike the Palestinian Authority, it stands up to Israel in some visible way, even ways that strike us and are, in fact, morally horrifying.

But none of that is a justification, right?

Or any kind of reasonable justification for hurting this many people.

So let me offer two different possible rationales for the siege.

And the first is maybe the most classic, which is you're simply literally weakening the enemy.

If there is not electricity and fuel and food and water going to Hamas either.

I mean, you've taken it from a lot of people, but we're going to them either.

If the population is furious that Hamas has done this to them, right?

If they do hold Hamas at least partially culpable for the Israeli punishment, then maybe you make it easier to uproot Hamas.

You weaken Hamas as a fighting force, you weaken their hold on the population.

And as brutal as it is, it actually leads to a shorter, at least more winnable conflict.

What do you think of that?

So what happens when you conduct a siege like that is the resources that are left, right?

Generators, oil, whatever ways of scrounging up water exist.

They get diverted to the military opponent that you're facing.

So what you end up doing might not end up hurting Hamas immediately, but it will, without a doubt,

end up doing extraordinary amounts of harm to the civilian population.

The policy isn't very well thought through on a tactical level.

There are some advantages to it, but if you really play it out, it doesn't do, I think, what some people who are okay with it think it will.

And that's even before we talk about the real problem with it, which is the morality, right?

Seiges are a permissible military tactic, according to a lot of ethicists, when it's really just an enemy enclave, right?

Ultimately, if there's only fighters there, it's not very different to blow them up than to starve them out in moral terms.

But when civilians are there, it's a whole different ballgame, and there are 2 million people in Gaza, right?

Hamas's fighting force, I believe the estimate is 30,000.

1.97 million people who you're starving out, you're depriving of water, of adequate sanitation, of medical resources to get at 30,000.

To me, there's just no way to make those numbers work morally in any kind of humane or remotely defensible military policy.

So there's another rationale that I've heard, which is if you make life in Gaza untenable, if you make staying in Gaza choosing starvation or waterborne infectious disease, or choosing thirst for your children,

if you make Gazans flee by the hundreds of thousands and tell them to do it so they're not in the way of the bombs,

maybe they don't come back, or maybe you don't let them come back.

So you have hundreds of thousands of Gazans just gone.

And one difficulty with that before is that Egypt won't let them in,

but if there's enough misery, maybe that pushes the Egyptian government to open the border.

And so that's been this other theory of what Israel might be attempting to achieve here.

And I'm not saying that it's moral or according to the rules of war,

but it is a coherent strategy if part of Israel's goal is fewer Palestinians in Gaza.

Yeah, it's possible that that's what it is.

I mean, you've heard, at least from one Likud lawmaker in Israel, it's Netanyahu's party, saying that what they want is a second Nakba, which means a second catastrophe for Palestinians, and that refers to the 1948 war when Palestinians were in large part forced out of lands that's now controlled by Israel.

But it's not clear to me if that's actually guiding policy.

Based on my conversations with experts in the area, I don't think the goal is that well thought out or deliberate.

Israeli policymakers were reacting out of rage, out of panic, out of a sense of a need to do something,

and imposed a policy that they thought was justified by Hamas's attack.

Now, I don't think it is personally, but I think it really is more than anything else,

a product of feeling like there's been this incredible assault on Israel and they need to do everything they can to address it.

So one description of Israel's strategy and where it might be going came from this interview in political with Amos Yadlan,

who's former chief of Israeli military intelligence, a sort of important Israeli military thinker. And to situate him, he's on the center left in Israel, part of labor. And he said that they are thinking of Gaza like a neighboring country run by the government of Hamas and quote, we declare war on this country and we're going to destroy the state very much like what the Allies did to Germany in 1945, very much like what the US did to ISIS, to the caliphate in Iraq and Syria 2014 to 2019. And so what I take him as saying is that if you shift the metaphor a bit, don't think of Hamas as a terrorist organization hiding among civilians, think of them as a legitimate government of Gaza, then invading Gaza and destroying the government and the state that attacked you is the most normal thing of all in military history. That's totally right. And it also in terms of the Israeli thinking and it also came up. I mean, it's omnipresent in Israeli discourse. The ISIS analogies and the Nazi analogies in particular are really dominant inside the Israeli conversation right now. One example, I was talking about the siege with an Israeli military historian. You know, I told him that I thought it was very difficult to defend. And he said something like, well, did the Allies provide electricity to the Nazis during World War II? He also, by the way, was a figure on the center left. He said, you know, I supported two state solution, et cetera. These aren't just rabid right-wingers. There's a consensus in Israel that Hamas really is a neighboring government that needs to be destroyed. The question, I think, is what destroyed means and whether or not you really support what it would mean to try to launch a purely military effort to eliminate Hamas. Let's hold on that for a minute because I want to get at something beneath some of the defenses here that I've heard even just from Jewish people, more in support of Israel's current tactics in my own life. One thing they say, or one thing I hear in what they're saying, is that they feel Israel in 2023 is being held to laws and mores of war that did not exist, really, or at least were not followed when America won the wars that made America what it is today, and among other things, importantly, in this defeat of the Nazis, when the countries that exist today won their territory, often by displacing other peoples and creating mass migrations, that there is a demand on Israel to act in a way other states did not have to act because it was not the modern era with all these niceties like the UN and phones where you can see what people are doing on the ground, but that in truth war has always been more brutal and that when you are trying to eliminate a threat like this, you have to be more brutal and that Israel is being held to an unusually high standard that nobody else has demanded their countries in the past meet. So I think that's partially true, but I think a lot of it has to do less with changing norms and double standards than it does with the nature of the Hamas threat itself.

And what Hamas has done, there's actually a technical term for this in the philosophy of just war, it's called perfidy.

It's a specific kind of abuse of the laws of war where you manipulate them such that your opponent can't wage war justly.

When you force essentially you use morality as a shield to protect yourself.

That's Hamas's strategy. They want in these military campaigns lots of Palestinians civilians to die.

They want them to die rather than their fighters.

They want them to die because that's what helps them win in the long run.

It gets them more support.

It shows that the Israelis are as brutal as Palestinians think they are.

It gets them international sympathy.

They are, the Israelis are forced into fighting a truly evil group, but the fact that they've committed perfidy and that they've done horrible things doesn't mean that you can just do whatever you want.

If that's the case, the things that Israel could do are far, far worse than the things that it's already doing, which is a frightening prospect.

We're speaking on Thursday, October 26.

As of now, they have not launched the ground invasion of Gaza.

The expectation is that they will, I guess we will see.

One thing you spent a lot of time doing in your reporting is talking to experts on military strategy on the region, on counterterrorism, about what it would mean to invade Gaza, and whether it would end up making Israel safer, whether it was a good idea.

What did you find?

So I want to start with the actual invasion itself, right?

We're going to send troops and we're going to try to essentially topple the Hamas government as they see it.

Well, that's really hard in military terms.

Hamas is this gigantic tunnel network.

I've heard one description that says larger than the London Tube.

Can I note something about this that I think people don't fully hear on it?

Go ahead.

People hear this and they think Hamas has built a bunch of tunnels underground in last year, a couple of years in order to make it harder to fight them in the ground in Gaza, right?

Like a war fighting strategy.

But this is a more than a decade long project with huge amounts of investment in it because it is the only way the Gaza import-export economy can work.

And so you're dealing with a tunnel network that I think is much more stunning than people are used to because it wasn't particularly at the beginning just for a war fighting purpose.

These are not little tunnels to hide a person in so he can pop out and shoot you.

These are tunnels that you can bring construction materials through, tunnels that you can bring huge amounts of material in.

When I started to understand the depth of the tunnel network, this looked a lot different to me.

Yeah, and that's layered on top of the ordinary challenges of fighting in an urban environment, which is already on its own, very, very difficult, right?

You have to watch from threats from the sky, drones, for example.

You have to watch from threats from the building, soldiers sniping at your soldiers or firing RPGs, and you have to watch at the street level, right?

Or whatever it is that Hamas has set up on the ground plus below you for invading Israeli soldiers. This is a death trap.

And second, lots and lots of civilians would die in part because of the Israeli need to protect their own soldiers, right?

There's a direct trade-off in urban warfare if you're in a populated area between what you do to preserve your own soldier's life, which would involve a lot of airstrikes in advance and generally having a pretty loose set of rules of engagement

and what you do to preserve civilian life, which is minimizing the amount of airstrikes that you use and going very slowly and putting your own troops at risk.

When I hear something like destroy Hamas as the objective, I think the question for me that brings up is what is Hamas?

And a couple of answers present. Hamas is people.

There are people who hold positions within Hamas or are kind of foot soldiers within Hamas.

There's material, right? They have caches of rockets and drones and so on.

It is to some degree local support, the sort of attachment from the civilian population that gives them new recruits and allows them to hide within the citizenry and is why they, to some degree, at least rule Gaza.

So I guess you're saying you're going to destroy those three things.

I'm sure there are more that you can think of, but I'm curious what you hear.

What do you have to destroy to have destroyed Hamas?

When I talk to Israelis, there is not a clear sense of what that term means.

And in many ways, it's really the crux of the issue.

There's a consensus on you need to destroy Hamas, but there's a question of what that means and what it entails.

I think the ordinary language understanding of it and the one that is most prevalent in the discussion is it means literally end the organization, destroy the organization that mounted the October 7th attacks and never allowed to constitute itself again.

It's an incredibly tall order.

It's very, very, very hard to do that as any kind of military, even one as well-equipped and advanced and trained as the IDF is.

There's another meaning of it, though, which is to destroy Hamas's military capability.

Destroy the people who were responsible for this attack and ensure that it could never happen again.

Maybe something named Hamas will still exist after that.

Maybe it'll still operate.

Maybe it'll even still rule Gaza.

But you can say, if you're an Israeli, that we destroyed the organization, meaning specifically the people who are in charge and executed the October 7th attack.

Those are two senses of the term, both of which could be used, but I get the strong impression that the former is predominating in Israel.

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Let's say they executed ground invasion, and let's say that they can do a fair amount.

They're able to degrade a lot of Hamas's military capabilities.

They're able to kill a number of Hamas's top leadership, a number of its foot soldiers.

Then what?

So that is the million dollar question, and it is the question that no one I have spoken to, and I don't think anyone in the Israeli government actually has a plan for.

I'd really recommend reading a piece in the Financial Times on this, where they got a bunch of senior Israeli sources on record talking about the planning.

Turns out they're still planning it.

This piece was like, you know, at the time of recording, it was like a day or two ago.

Well, we'll put this piece in show notes.

There's one fantastic quote in there says, the Americans went ballistic when they heard that Israel had no plan for what to do in the event after Hamas.

Basically, I think there's sort of three options, and of them, only one of them is really feasible.

If what you really want to do is destroy Hamas.

So the first one is that you just go in, you wreck the place and you leave.

And if that happens, well, Hamas probably just reconstitutes itself.

We know from pretty bitter experience on the American side that you can't take out a terrorist organization in one fell swoop.

A second option would be to install some kind of collaborationist Palestinian government and then leave.

The problem with that is if you don't back it with armed force, Hamas or some other kind of Palestinian militant, there are a lot of them in the Gaza Strip, end up toppling this government and you're right back where you started.

So the third option and the one that strikes me as most likely based on my own conversations with Israelis is an extended occupation of Gaza.

If you really want to destroy the entity that calls itself Hamas, right, the most literal definition, that's what you have to do.

As you go to Gaza, you occupy it for a long period of time, you engage in a pretty lengthy counterinsurgency campaign designed to topple the government, designed to ensure that Hamas, that its support is entirely stamped out among the population and it lacks its ability to rebuild.

And then only then after a very long period of fighting, do you try to create a government that can operate without Israeli forces on the ground.

This to me seems like a nightmarish option for any number of reasons.

But right now I'm worried based on what's coming out of the Israeli government that that's what they're sort of sleepwalking towards.

Why is that a nightmarish option?

They occupied Gaza for a long time and I don't think right now the pull out and I think it's strange language

because it kept the blockade and a lot of control over it, but they did not occupy Gaza in the way they had.

They did not try to govern it in the way they had.

And I don't think right now they look at that as a success.

No, I mean, look, Hamas built itself while Israel was occupying Gaza, right?

That's when the organization really came to prominence in the 1990s when I conducted a series of terrorist attacks inside Israel that were very explicitly designed to disrupt the Israeli-Palestinian peace process at that time.

And Israel was still occupying Gaza.

So that's one thing, right?

Is like that doesn't really work if you look at the historical record.

The other thing is looking at different kinds of historical records, right?

Namely the experience of countries occupying what are essentially foreign countries in the counterinsurgency campaign.

And it's quite bad.

These very often fail to accomplish their goal of creating a peaceful post-war environment.

They create a situation where these terrorist groups can reconstitute themselves often in worse forms, right?

That's the origin story of ISIS.

It really grew out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was itself not very strong until the U.S. invaded Iraq.

One thing that I feel like people who know a lot about ISIS are being driven crazy by right now is that the analogy to ISIS, which has become so popular, Hamas as ISIS, runs the other way.

Yeah, it's like you don't want to encourage the growth of, I mean, you can say a worse version of Hamas.

They're already pretty horrible, right?

But an environment where they can reconstitute themselves in even stronger form, right?

Because like there are two important salient facts about how that might and probably would happen.

The first is something that Mark Lynch, who's an expert on Arab politics, told me when I was talking to him is he's like,

look, when the U.S. invaded Iraq, there were some real constituencies.

Shia, Kurds, who hated Saddam Hussein and had some interest in cooperating with the invaders.

There's nothing like that in Gaza.

Nothing. Everyone hates Israel.

They hate Israel because of the years of occupation prior to Hamas.

They hate Israel because of the blockade.

They hate Israel because of all the bombing campaigns.

There's no group in Gaza that would welcome or cooperate with the Israeli counterinsurgency campaign,

which means you're in there with Israeli forces who are getting shot at by Hamas partisans who are hiding among the population all the time.

It's the nightmare scenario for any effort to try to impose governance on a society.

Who's going to cooperate with you?

Who are you going to get to run the government when you can't do it?

It's just there's no plausible to me end game for how you bring peace to such an environment.

And really, the most likely outcome is the second thing I was alluding to is that Hamas builds its support among Palestinians because it shows itself to be resisting the Israeli occupation.

And even if Israel has good intentions, the best possible intentions, which they may not, war crimes happen as part of these occupations.

They do. They're inevitable.

Every time that happens, Hamas gains new supporters.

Every Palestinian child who's killed by an Israeli bomb or accidentally shot by an Israeli ground soldier, blown up by a tank, every single one of those is a victory for Hamas.

I think sometimes about the math of vengeance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And one of the things that's been on my mind is our attunement to the Israeli math right now, right?

Joe Biden's saying that October 7th was like 9-11s when you adjust for a population.

So Gaza is smaller than Israel, two million people.

We don't really know the exact number of killed Gazans at this point, but it seems safe to say it's significantly higher than 1400 in a smaller area.

There have been many killed before this, of course, over years and years of fighting.

So what percentage of Gazans are one degree away or know somebody one degree away from somebody killed in an Israeli attack?

I would assume that it approaches 100%.

Very high. I mean, look, if you talk to Israelis, almost everybody knows somebody, right?

And I think we have a sensitivity to that, right?

It fills me with despair when I think about that.

But that is, I mean, put aside the question of Hamas, that is the wellspring of conflict, whether that conflict organizes itself under the banner of Hamas or not.

Everything that Israelis feel right now in wanting to avenge their dead, Palestinians feel too.

And as you keep adding more fuel of vengeance, I mean, it does create this long-term question, even aside from its short-term horror of like, where does that go?

I mean, look, the most cliché term in Middle East politics or specifically Arab Israeli politics is cycle of violence.

But it's cliché for a reason because it's true for exactly the reasons that you just described, right?

When you inflict violence on one group, they demand a violent response.

It just is the way that this conflict has gone forever.

And so the purpose of violence, what you want is peace in the end, and that is not true for all of the actors in this conflict.

But if what you want is peace, violence should only be used as a tactical measure in order to gain some degree of security that allows you to make longer term steps for peace and movements towards peace.

And that's just not what's happening right now.

The Hamas attack was the opposite of that.

It was designed, right?

The experts on Hamas think that the spectacular brutality, I mean, the truly awful description of what happened to Israeli civilians on that day.

I'm not going to get into them for the mental health of your listeners, but it's beyond evil to hear about that that was the point, right?

Those kinds of atrocities would force such a heavy-handed response to Israel that violent resistance in the Palestinian target would become the only acceptable cause.

And that the more peaceful approach of the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah party would be discredited.

In some ways, it's easy to know so much about the Israel-Palestine conflict, so much about its

tortured, contested history, who did what at the Camp David talks in 2000, and what was going on in Oslo in the second Intifada.

It really caught up in the specifics of it, and often correctly so.

But we actually know some things about terrorism broadly.

Sometimes I think it is useful to abstract out of this conflict and think about others.

And you talked to Audrey Cronin, who's a military strategy expert and the author of the book *How Terrorism Ends*, which is probably the best study of how terrorism ends.

What does her research say?

So one of Audrey's main research questions was the extent to which what she calls repression, that's violence basically of various different forms, is effective at dealing with terrorism and addressing it.

And what she found in the roughly 460 cases that she examined is that it's not.

It doesn't typically work.

And there are lots of reasons for that.

One of them is that the amount of violence that you need to do over a long period of time to repress a terrorist organization is A, huge, and B, often quite indiscriminate.

One thing I've learned from other studies of war and conflict is that a lot of civilian allegiance depends on their own self-interest.

If you are literally going to die because you don't collaborate with ex-group, then you'll collaborate with ex-group regardless of what your ideological or other allegiances incline you towards.

There's a great book on this by Stathis Kalyvas, who's a Greek political scientist.

It's called *The Logic of Violence and Civil Wars*.

But what that means is to really get civilians to not want to cooperate with an insurgent or terrorist group.

A lot of the time that entails threatening their lives in very, very, very large numbers directly and intentionally committing war crimes, right?

So a good example of this is the Sri Lankan military's defeat of the Tamil Tigers.

It took many years, was extremely bloody, and involved wide-scale repression of the Tamil population.

Israel will have a very hard time doing that.

I mean, I know there's a lot of critics of Israel right now accusing it of committing an incipient genocide.

There's not a lot of evidence that that's happening in part because the Israeli military is so strong that it could do so much more.

If what it really wanted to do was exterminate the Palestinian population or force them into a choice where it's give up on Hamas or we kill you.

They're not being super-discriminate, but they're not being indiscriminate either.

This speaks to something that Audrey told me, which I think is really insightful.

She said that Israel as a democracy is really ill-suited to do that kind of strategy.

A strategy of overwhelming repression.

That's right, because whatever you think about Israel, whatever you think about the politics, the treatment of the Palestinians,

there's a really essential self-conception of Israel as a democracy.

It really matters.

Even the parties on the extreme right claim to be standing up for Israeli democracy.

And there's a certain set of values associated with that that matter to the population. And so there's a level of force, a pretty significant level of force. They can countenance against Palestinians. But the level of force required to engage in pure repression strategy is well beyond that. I mean, however bad you think this conflict is, a full-scale repression strategy would be much, much, much, much worse. Much, much, much worse. And it just seems very hard to imagine the Israeli government doing that because it would cost them everything, both domestically and geopolitically. The U.S. I mean, that's the kind of thing they could force the U.S. to abandon Israel. So if overwhelming repression doesn't typically work, what does? I mean, a lot of it isn't something that external actors do, right? Sometimes terrorist groups just implode. Sometimes they get overtaken by a rival for political supremacy for one reason or another. But the one that you can have some influence over, it looks like, is addressing the political foundations of that terrorist group support and doing something to address the grievances that fuel it or come into some kind of political agreement with the group itself. Right here, the classic textbook example are the Good Friday Accords that ended the conflict in Northern Ireland, right, between the IRA and the British government. Good Friday was a very long process. I mean, getting there was a long and violent one. Not quite so violent as the Zero Palestine conflict, but it was, you know, very serious. Eventually, what led to the end of that insurgency was a negotiated settlement. That probably is not possible with Hamas, but there are other ways that you can change the political equation so you can encourage some of these other ways that terrorist groups end, like, for instance, being supplanted by an alternative faction. But I want to put a hold because we're going to talk about the political equation. But before we get to that, you went up after all this reporting when thinking about the short-term military question, saying, of all possible options, a focused counterterrorism strategy is the best most realistic military option available on every level, strategically, morally, and politically. So I want to begin here with definition. What is a counterterrorism strategy? What distinguishes it from things like a Gazan ground invasion, etc.? No, there might be a ground component to it. So I don't want to say that's not at all happening, but the key difference is the question of regime change. Does the Israeli military go in with the intent of putting tanks on the streets of Gaza City and setting up some kind of alternative governing arrangement inside Gaza, or at least creating room for one, or is the goal to, as we sort of discussed a little bit earlier, degrade Hamas to the point where it will no longer be able to pose a threat, at least in the immediate term, to Israeli civilians other than the occasional sporadic rocket fire

that's very hard to repress?

And the latter option is what I come to think of as a counterterrorism operation, and it has a few sort of very nitty gritty parts to it.

One of them is minimizing your ground invasion, right?

Israel shouldn't try to just conquer the whole territory, but rather target specifically in any grounds, initiatives that it does, Hamas leadership, and the people who perpetrated the October 7th attack, right?

And anyone else who might be in a position to plan or organize a similar kind of attack.

So that may mean ground incursions.

It might not.

It's hard for me to say without access to a lot of classified intelligence that the Israelis aren't sharing with me.

But one thing it probably does entail are significant special forces raids inside Gaza.

They're not omnipotent, but they can be much more discriminant in the way that they fight than regular military can be.

It means, I mean this is gruesome to talk about, but an extended assassination campaign targeting Hamas leaders both in Gaza and elsewhere.

Which they've done before.

Correct, right.

So at the end of the second Intifada, which is in the roughly early mid-2000s, Israel engaged in this concerted effort to kill anyone who it seemed was the Hamas leader.

At one point, this had proven so successful that Hamas didn't want to name whoever their next leader was.

They said, we have a new leader, but we won't tell you who it is because they were so afraid that that person would also be killed by an Israeli bomb or an Israeli bullet.

And that did seem to have an effect on Hamas's violence at that point in time.

Basically, there are only so many people who have the skills to plan a terrorist attack.

There are only so many people who know how to build bombs.

There's only so many people who are charismatic enough to inspire effective support from underlings.

So if you really engage in a significant extended campaign to kill those people, it can have an effect on the ability of that group to plan and execute attacks.

It can't end the group.

But here, another good example is what the U.S. actually did do right in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda is a shadow of itself right now than it was beforehand.

The group's not eliminated, but its capacity to pose a threat to the U.S. homeland is dramatically diminished, even with the Taliban in charge of Afghanistan.

You can say the same thing about ISIS.

After the international counterterrorism campaign against them, they don't really control the territory that they controlled in Iraq and Syria in the past.

This can work even if it can't destroy the group.

But what it does, what it really is, is a containment strategy rather than a, you know, actually, we're going to destroy in the literal sense of destroy the organization.

Distinguish is a little bit more for me because what I'm hearing is a distinction of degrees, not

necessarily of kind, right?

This might include a ground incursion, maybe a ground invasion.

When the experts you spoke to say they should do this and not that, how did they draw the line?

Well, one way to do it is duration.

So Dan Byman, who's a professor at Georgetown who studies Israeli counterterrorism strategy, told me that they should plan any ground operation to last for at most a matter of weeks.

Rather than months or one Israeli source suggested up to 10 years of potential fighting in Gaza.

This is an order of magnitude.

Many orders of magnitude probably different in terms of the scale of the operation.

The objectives are different.

It's not taking out literally everything that the group can do.

It's about degrading its capacity to engage in violence, right?

So rather than destroying, you know, the institutions that Hamas has set up to function as a governing entity.

In Gaza, you target more specifically the political and military leadership who ordered the attack.

It's the difference between regime change and counterterrorism, right?

I know I'm using the word that was sort of buzzword to describe it, but I think that's a really important and in many ways, intuitive distinction.

What does counterterrorism mean?

And honestly, what do any of these past mean for the hostages?

I think it's important not to forget their existence here, right?

Hamas still has, I don't know the exact number, but a very significant number of hostages who are being held somewhere.

They see them as their bargaining chips.

How does this speak to the goal of getting them home?

Yeah, I mean, it's a really, really grim situation when it comes to hostages, right?

It's not clear to me that there is anything that Israel can give Hamas that they'd be willing to pay that can get the hostages back in negotiations.

They're trying right now.

They're internationally brokered talks.

The U.S. is involved.

Qatar is involved as a sort of international Hamas patron.

And those need to keep happening.

And they obviously are happening in a parallel track to Israel's military offensive in Gaza, which is ongoing.

I wrote in the piece that Israel should try as best as it can to get intelligence on where they are in mount rescue operations.

I also noted that the prospects of success for that are really dim in part because of the tunnel stuff we were talking about for a while, right?

When you have this giant, confusing warren underneath Gaza, it's going to be very, very, very hard for Israel to figure out exactly where people are and to kind of get a special forces team in position to actually bring hostages out.

That's logistically difficult for all kinds of different reasons.

So it's awful.

It's less awful than a full scale ground invasion would be.

The reason for that is if you make it seem like Hamas is about to be destroyed fully, they have every incentive to start executing hostages.

I can't say there's any way to stop that from happening, right?

This is in the nature of Hamas.

They specifically designed their strategy around horrific instances of violence in order to terrify and incite disproportionate responses from the Israelis.

So it's, I mean, I don't think anyone has a good answer to this.

Honestly, I wish I could give you a better one.

No one I spoke to had a solution to this that was anything like satisfying.

It's well reported by now that as part of the tremendous intelligence failure on the Israeli side, they could see Hamas preparing for this assault.

They could see Hamas playing its war games and practicing its incursions, and they just didn't think much of it.

They thought that Hamas would never attempt something like this.

So whatever Hamas was doing, they didn't intend to go through with it.

They were either trying to threaten Israel or just show that they have capabilities or whatever, but then they actually did do it.

That's what I've heard from a lot of Israelis that the key mistake was thinking that we had pacified Hamas and that Hamas now had like responsibilities to the Gazans.

It was not going to do something like this and incur this kind of wrath, and that's why they didn't take them seriously.

Yeah, I think there's two components to that.

The first one you just alluded to is deterrence, right?

So Israel has for a long time had a policy towards Hamas of what they call mowing the grass, which is Hamas gets strong.

It builds up its military.

There's some kind of escalation.

They fight an air war, degrade Hamas's capacity to launch attacks, and the whole cycle starts over.

It's a pretty euphemistic description of what really means a lot to people dying.

But the Israelis thought that the punishment they'd inflicted on Hamas during these repeated episodes had made it such that they don't want to do what they just did.

And the second thing is that the government had calculated that they had other interests related here that outweighed the potential terrorist threat from Hamas, which they deemed limited.

And here I'm talking specifically about defanging the two-state solution.

Benjamin Netanyahu has been a very, very, very long-time opponent of any kind of negotiated solution with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu even said that this was part of his strategy at a Likud closed-door meeting.

He said, and I quote,

Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas.

He continues,

This is part of our strategy to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Now, this is single-sourced. We don't know if that's exactly what he said,

but it's been widely reported that something like that was set at the meeting.

And it's what they were doing.

Yeah, it is what they were doing, right?

The policy, there's a very good piece by Paul Schneider as a reporter at the Times of Israel detailing all the different policy mechanisms that were used to pursue this policy, right?

And one of them was, for instance, facilitating monetary payments from Qatar to Hamas that would allow them to stabilize their regime, right?

They had thought that this was a winning strategy for their ultimate geopolitical objective of allowing Israel to continue to colonize the West Bank unimpeded.

So when I was preparing for this conversation, I read this piece by Lawrence Friedman, who is a professor of war studies at King's College, and he wrote this in the FT.

And this one line has just been ringing in my head, which is it,

Israel is trying to develop a military strategy to deal with the Hamas threat while it lacks a political strategy.

Something that it seems everybody told you, too, is that, OK, counterterrorism operation is one piece of this.

But as you were saying around the research in how terrorism ends, a political strategy, something that saps the underlying support for the terrorist group, is the only long-term solution.

Yes, I think that's basically correct.

First, at this point, do you agree with Friedman that there is no dominant political strategy in Israel?

Yeah, there just isn't.

I mean, up until now, there was a strategy of containing Hamas and of sort of propping it up, just sort of thinking that you can deter them from launching large-scale attacks, and it's a manageable problem.

Since that strategy has been blown up, I mean, it's been blown up since October 7th.

It's been a matter of weeks.

And Israel has not developed an entirely new national security strategy in weeks.

They don't know what they're doing in the current government because they are forced to reconsider every single assumption they had about how to guarantee security for their own population.

I mean, there's just no sense of what should be done in the long term.

There's a sense of what we need to do immediately among Israelis, but there really is not a broader strategy in place yet.

But is there even one on the shelf?

So for a very long time, I think the strategy was two-state solution.

Not necessarily agreed on by all Israelis, but that was the sort of international working framework for what everybody was eventually going to do here.

And obviously, the details of that were very contested.

In recent years, that was moved away from and that the facts on the ground be moved against that.

There are too many settlements, too little trust between the parties.

And I don't know that there was really a dominant alternative that emerged, but I do think there were things like it.

Like something I've been thinking about is a paper written by Bezalel Smotrich, who is now the finance minister.

Pretty hard right guy.

But he had this big 2017 analysis of what he thought should be done.

And it I think is a reminder that there were other ideas floating around.

So he writes, quote, ending the conflict means creating and cementing the awareness practically and politically.

There's room for only one expression of national self-determination west of the Jordan River, that of the Jewish nation.

Subsequently, an Arab state actualizing Arab national aspirations cannot emerge within the same territory.

Victory involves shelving this dream and his motivation for its fulfillment dwindles, so will the terror campaign against Israel.

And his basic prescription in that, I mean, which I think we can fairly call apartheid, is consistent repression.

But as a terrorism threat recedes, Israel is governing a large state that includes a number of Palestinian second class citizens who have better or worse lives depending on how they are acting.

But eventually their hope for a state is extinguished and either they leave or they settle into the Israeli status quo and Israel can treat them better under those terms.

And that that is a form of a Jewish one state solution that I'm not saying everybody agreed with.

But I don't know, I think if you look at what Israel was doing, it doesn't look totally off the path they were on.

Yeah, I think people outside of Israel and the policy circles that discuss this underestimate the importance of this paper.

They probably never heard of it, but it's really, I think, very significant in describing what the current government was doing prior to October 7th.

Right? Not all of Israel or even all of Netanyahu's different governments, but the current one, which is, I mean, it's the most extreme right wing government in Israel's history.

And he's in it notably, Smutrich. He's a finance minister. It's a big job.

Yeah, and not just finance minister. His job has been structured such that he has control over the West Bank policy, basically.

So he could determine what was going on in that component of occupied territories.

And one thing that's really striking about his paper from our current vantage point is that he doesn't talk about Gaza at all.

It's not really a problem for him. He thought that Israel could secure its long-term future by pacifying the West Bank and you can pacify the West Bank by depriving Palestinians of hope.

Now, it turns out every element of that assumption was wrong.

We now know because of October 7th that wasn't working, but we also know that it's what he was trying to do.

I mean, Israel had was moving towards de facto annexation of the West Bank prior to October 7th, which means merging Israeli domestic law with the law of the occupied territories.

They've been kept separate because the notion of the occupation was that it was temporary that eventually Israel would leave.

It wasn't annexing this land. But under Smutrich and his policies towards the West Bank, we were moving closer and closer towards a formal de facto in the sense of non-announced, but formal integration of the laws and formal annexation of the West Bank.

But what choice was there except for that? I mean, I think when people think of the settlements, I mean, just picture in your head what the number is you think live in the settlements in the West Bank.

The implication of the term is it's modest. It's 700,000 people, right? That's significant. I mean, the idea that Israel is not governing, I mean, they're Israeli citizens, obviously, the idea that Israel is not governing them and thus the territory in which they live, a portion of its population in that significant is absurd.

Yeah. I mean, there's an important caveat there, which is that a lot of the settlements and the large population of them live just on the border with Israel proper and really in areas near Jerusalem. They're functionally suburbs of Jerusalem. And so in most of the peace proposals or the maps that people have drawn up, a lot of those get annexed to Israel in exchange for territorial swaps that are currently Israeli territories, going to a Palestinian territory. So those settlements are less of a problem and they are the main population center. That being said, you're right on the basics of the situation. I mean, they're scattered all around and they're scattered all around, by the way, by design. The point of the placement of a lot of these settlements is to cut off Palestinian communities from each other.

And by that, I don't just mean like it's between them.

I mean, because of what Israel has to do to secure settlers who might otherwise be vulnerable to attacks from Palestinian militant groups, you end up creating the situation where it's extremely difficult for Palestinians to get around for their communities to be connected.

I mean, in one place that I went to outside of Jerusalem, there is one home, part of a Palestinian town.

It's a little bit off from the town center, but that puts it directly adjacent to an Israeli settlement. Now, the settlers didn't want Palestinians coming into their land.

So what did the Israeli military do? They built a cage around this house and they built a walkway that's all fenced in, that connects the house to the village that it's nominally a part of.

So the people who live there have to walk by settlers who are on the outside of what's essentially their home as a prison

and seize them walking by to get into the town.

It's hard to overstate how disruptive the settlement enterprise is for Palestinians.

The political barrier to dismantling all of this is figuring out how to get those people out of there, not logistically.

That's not actually that difficult.

It's surmounting the political opposition to the trauma that it would cause, right?

The disengagement from Gaza was very difficult at first release to begin with.

I think the biggest difference in the politics of this issue over the past 20 years is a number of people who now believe the two-state solution is dead.

There are no end of pieces in places like foreign affairs, right, where this would not have really been sayable 20 years ago.

For the exact reason you just said, the number of settlers, the number of people you'd have to pull

back into Israel,
the amount of political power they have, how politically impossible that looks,
there is no two-state solution because even before you get to all these other questions like right of return
and a lot of other things that I think often get ignored in how hard a significant settlement would be,
you cannot unwind the settlement growth of the past 20 years.
And if you can't unwind that, there is no land swap that would create a Palestinian state that makes any sense.
Now, you're more optimistic on this, but I'd like to hear why because I actually find that quite convincing.
Optimistic is the wrong word, right?
It's more that like as hard as it seems to get to a two-state solution from where we are right now.
It's that all of the alternatives are even less viable and you have to go somewhere.
Stasis is not possible.
I think that's one lesson of October 7th.
As horrible as it is, we now know that Israel trying to maintain the kind of relationship it has with Palestinians,
both in Gaza and the West Bank, is not durable in the long run.
There will continue to be unpredictable spurts of violence and that will cause some of this change.
The question is, what is it going to change towards?
But I think it is a conceptual mistake that is very common among people who study any kind of policy
to believe that a problem will ultimately end in a solution.
Sure.
Right, that there will be some answer, right, that answer the problem.
But you can have much more extended misery than I think people tend to believe in policy circles.
You can have very complicated muddling throughs.
And so the place I have moved to is, I in some ways think the whole conversation about one state and two state
has become weirdly, it's like too far, right?
You need precursors to just better than this.
No, I think that's right.
So when you talk to people about what are the strategies that could begin to shift the political equilibrium of the conflict
in a tactical and specific way, what did they say?
Not like what could end it all.
Like what could you do incrementally slowly year by year that might be trust building that might begin to pry open doors just a little bit that feel closed now?
Yeah, look, I think it's important to understand that the occupation of the West Bank, which is where most of these changes would happen,
is an immensely complicated legal political and military institution.
It depends on lots of different policies to expand.
And you can start changing some of them.
You can start rolling some of them back to make life better for ordinary Palestinians, which is, I

think really the key to this political situation is to show Palestinians that there's a way forward that doesn't involve violence.

So like what, what could you roll back?

So one would be land use policies.

A lot of what Israel does right now in the area is to change land regulations such that it's easy for settlements or at least easier for settlers to take over a different Palestinian land.

And there are a number of specific things, even see some that are related to national park services that are used as basically pretexts to grab Palestinian land.

Another one would be cutting down or dismantling some of the checkpoints that dot the West Bank and then make it hard for Palestinians to move around from one place to another.

Cutting down on those would substantially improve the Palestinian economy.

A third would be a cash investment.

This is a policy that the former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad pursued, which is a policy of economic development.

It didn't work out for a variety of reasons.

It's not really Fayyad's fault.

In my view, it's a fault of the sclerotic Palestinian political organization and an Israeli government that really wasn't very interested in making Palestinian lives a lot better.

That's something international donors could help change.

There's already a lot of money going in.

There are better ways to organize that funding.

We can go through dozens of different specific, like very nitty-gritty specific policies.

Or another one, start doing a better job at preventing provocations from right-wing Israelis on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Like going in, storming in to al-Aqsa Mosque and praying ostentatiously, claiming the land, claiming the Temple Mount and the Mosque for Jews.

That kind of thing has a tendency to really explode tensions between the two groups.

One reason Hamas called the operation al-Aqsa Flood.

Correct.

Correct.

Israel does so much right now that enables the growth of settlements and that really makes life horrible and anger-inducing for a lot of ordinary Palestinians.

But one other thing that October 7th has done is discredit Benjamin Netanyahu among the Israeli public.

I mean, if you look at every piece of polling data right now on his approval rating, on a hypothetical election, I mean, his numbers have collapsed because Israelis very rightly blame him for what happened.

They blame his strategy, his approach to Israeli security for what happened.

So for the first time in a long time, Israel has been really caught in this political log jam.

And for the first time in a long time, it seems as if there could be something new politically that could happen, that could actually have a durable base and a large one among the Israeli population.

This speaks to, I think, another very dominant view right now in Israel.

Which was something people were saying before this, which is given, I think, credibility after the attacks, which is that Netanyahu and his government were weakening Israel by dividing Israel so

profoundly internally over things like the judicial reforms.

That the effort to change the character of Israel as a state was something that made it impossible for Israel to keep focus on its actual threats.

And I'm curious how you rate where that anger sits now and what that may or may not make possible.

I mean, it's still pretty profound.

There are these videos.

I don't know if you've seen them.

Have you, as sort of government ministers, getting yelled at by ordinary Israelis?

Yeah, I have.

Yeah.

So they get screamed at by ordinary Israelis who blame them for what happened.

And it's easy to forget now, given how different the world seems after Hamas' attack.

But Israel had been experiencing the largest protests of its entire history for most of this year against the judicial reform.

This was an issue, an attempt really to alter the foundation of Israeli democracy that was vastly unpopular and significantly undercut trust in the government.

Netanyahu's approval ratings were bad before the worst terrorist attack in Israeli history happened under his watch.

He's currently on trial on charges related to corruption, some of which are quite serious.

There's no trust from the Israeli political mainstream.

He has a hard core of supporters, but people don't believe him to be the guarantor of their security or of their country's prosperity or political future that they thought he once was.

So that creates a tremendous opening for there to be some kind of political alternative.

Now, what that alternative looks like, not quite as obvious right now.

The polling suggests that Betty Gauntz, who has joined an emergency coalition with Netanyahu, is the primary beneficiary of public dissent.

This makes sense.

Gauntz is sort of a centrist, center right type figure, former general, very hawkish on the Palestinian conflict, not on settlements though.

He's hawkish.

And this is another sort of poorly understood dividing line outside of Israel.

The people who are most hardcore about the settlements are not always the people who are most hardcore about responding to terrorist attacks with force.

There's a correlation there, but they can be delinked.

So Gauntz is very, very aggressive when it comes to military attacks, but he is not ideologically committed to settlements.

And there's another person aligned with him, Gotti Eisencote, former chief of staff of the IDF, who probably would be even more inclined,

if given a position of power, to wind down or at least roll back some of what has been done under Netanyahu to entrench Israeli control over the West Bank.

So if he's defense minister, let's say we could see a very, very different West Bank policy in the event that politics change as much as polls suggest they're going to.

And then always our final question, what are three books you recommend to the audience?

So I want to start with A High Price, which is Dan Byman's history of Israeli counterterrorism policy. It's a little bit dated now and it's published about 10 years ago or so.

But to my mind, it's one of the best serious interrogations of what Israel does or what its playbook is for dealing with terrorist groups, where it works and where it doesn't.

I learned a lot from reading Dan's book.

A second book I'd recommend is the Selected Works of Edward Said.

It's a famous Palestinian American intellectual.

There's a lot in there that's not related to the conflict, but Said is one of the most articulate exponents ever to live of the Palestinian cause.

And if you want to understand where Palestinians are coming from and how they feel about Israeli occupation, it's hard to do better than then going to Said's work.

And the third book I'd recommend, since we spent so much time talking about the West Bank, is a book by an Israeli journalist named Gersham Gorenberg called The Accidental Empire.

And I love Gorenberg's book because he really traces the history of how settlements emerged, the ways in which Israeli policy facilitated their development, and the ways in which Israeli governments were taken by surprise by what they had allowed to happen.

And how settlers themselves pioneered this fundamental transformation to the conflict that was not necessarily, although at times it seemed like it was, part of Israeli strategic design.

It's a really, I think, an essential insight into how things got to the point where they're at right now.

Zach Beecham, thank you very much.

Thanks, Ezra.

This episode of The Ezra Klein Show produced by Emma Fogau, fact-checking by Michelle Harris with Kate Sinclair and Ray Marchlocker.

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