

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / The Jewish Left Is Trying to Hold Two Thoughts at Once

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

I don't really know how to start this.

Grief moves slowly and war moves quickly.

One person said, after last week's audio essay, that to so quickly focus on the Israeli army's response lacked a certain humanism, and I understood and felt what they meant.

I also want to stay in the grief I have for the Israelis killed and the fear I have for the hostages being held.

And I think there would have been wisdom, emotional and geopolitical if Israel had given itself time to grieve and time to plan before fully committing to a response.

But that's not what happened.

Israel dropped more than 6,000 bombs on Gaza in just the first week, tightening a noose around the territory, keeping out food and water and medicine and fuel.

A report I saw a few days ago said that the Gaza is down to one week of insulin, one week of insulin, less now.

My wife is a type 1 diabetic, dependent on insulin to stay alive.

A detail like that carries force for me.

What if it was my wife, the person I love most, who couldn't get insulin?

More than 5,000 Palestinians have been reported dead, many more injured.

There's a part of me that would like to stay in my feelings from right after Hamas's attack, but that is not where this has held.

And the decisions being made now and that will be made soon will decide a lot of lives.

My approach to this topic is going to be to try to keep the boundaries of what can be said and considered open, to try to add context and to try to hear out a lot of different perspectives.

I said this last week, I'm not somebody who believes that I know how to solve this conflict.

I'm not somebody who believes this conflict can currently be solved.

I think we're at a much more primitive point in it right now.

But the building towards somewhere better, I think, requires a lot of different experiences to be heard.

So I have plans for shows right now with people who are much further right than me on this.

I have plans that will center on Palestinian experiences and voices.

But I wanted to begin with a show closer to where I am, which is not a popular or easy place to be at the moment, which is the Jewish Left.

Many of us on the Jewish Left on this felt abandoned and morally appalled at the comments of people who had once been our allies immediately after.

What the Left came to mean quickly in this conflict, the people who defined it, were people who seemed to give no consideration to the lives of Israelis.

We do.

In many cases, the point of our involvement here is that we are attached in a deep way to Israel.

Meanwhile, the force and ferocity of the Israeli response built, and if you believe, as many of us believe, that there is no answer to this for Israel, for anybody, until Israel can live in security while Palestinians do not live inside a regime of oppression and humiliation and misration and terror, then amidst grief is a fear this is only getting

worse.

Israelis mourn their dead and hate their killers just as much and fiercely as Israelis do, and the two sides somehow must live next to each other.

So what is the plan here?

There are ideas that float around, and they've become, I think, scarier in recent years.

In 2017, Bezael Smotrich wrote that, quote, any solution must be based on cutting off the ambition to realize the Arab national hope between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.

This statement, the Arab yearning for national expression in the land of Israel cannot be repressed is incorrect.

He now serves in Netanyahu's cabinet as minister of finance.

This is the kind of thinking that has been in power in recent years.

The thinking that says the repression has not been full enough.

It has brought us here.

But that does not mean it will weaken now.

It may well strengthen.

There are those who think a permanent occupation or an act of mass expulsion are the only true answers in this conflict.

So I wanted to have a conversation with some other people coming from a similar perspective, but with a lot more expertise on the core issues here than I have.

Spencer Ackerman is a national security reporter, Pulitzer Prize winner, author of the newsletter Forever Wars, author of the great book on post-911 politics, Rain of Terror.

Peter Beinart writes for New York Times Opinion.

He's a professor of journalism and political science at City University, New York.

He's the editor-at-large of Jewish Currents and author of the sub-stack, The Beinart Notebook.

And they've both been writing pieces that I think are of deep relevance right now.

Spencer has been particularly following up on the symmetries to post-911 politics in America and the way military planning happens in that kind of moment.

Beinart wrote a great piece thinking about the question, before you can ever get to any kind of settlement, you need groups in power on both sides that would want to see a settlement.

So if you want non-violence to take hold, if you want other tactics to work, how are they rewarded?

Where do the feedback loops that can be created to give more power to those who want to see something very different?

As always, my email is reclinedshowatnmytimes.com Peter Beinart, Spencer Ackerman, welcome to the show.

Thanks for having me.

Thanks.

So Spencer, I want to begin here.

What is your sense now of what Hamas was trying to achieve in this attack?

So there have been some interesting reports that have come out this week that I think clarify that question, but not in a satisfying way.

There was a report out of the Washington Post where a Hamas senior official sort of on the face of it, meaning to heighten a message of Israeli vulnerability, nevertheless said that they didn't reckon that Israel would respond the way that Israel has, that they

thought they would take some hostages and negotiate them for the thousands of Palestinians who were in Israeli military prisons and the status quo anti would prevail.

I think if it turns out that indeed Hamas was trying for a more limited sense of concrete achievement for liberating prisoners that has turned out to be just catastrophically wrong.

I've seen some reporting similarly from Hamas on this and I've found it truly bizarre.

I mean, this was in planning, in scale, a kind of attack Hamas had never launched before.

It's a land, sea and air attack.

It involves mass killing of Israeli civilians, some things they probably didn't know they would stumble into like the rave, which led to quite a bit of their body count.

Maybe their soldiers or whatever you want to call them took a kind of gruesome initiative in that.

But they also spread videos of them killing Israelis on social media.

They've been on people's Facebook pages, almost gloating about their death.

There were a lot of hostages taken.

There are a lot of ways people characterize Hamas, but it would take a kind of genuine madness and true irrationality to me for them to plan an attack of that scale and not believe it would create an overwhelming Israeli response.

Now, there's been like a lot of commentaries saying, well, they must have known they would get this kind of response.

And so they wanted it.

They wanted to provoke Israel into this kind of attack.

They wanted to disrupt the accords with Saudi Arabia, something like that.

And those two narratives now seem in real tension.

So I'm curious how you think about that piece of it.

So one thing that struck me from the first wave of Hamas statements during the weekend of the seventh after Sincla Torah was that they didn't mention the Saudi deal.

I was writing a piece for the nation precisely about this when it happened and was looking very closely to see the degree to which, if at all, Hamas would mention it and they didn't.

They were talking about more material facts closer to home rather than diplomatic facts on the horizon from 30,000 feet above, the freeing of the prisoners, the loosening of the Israeli strangulation of Gaza on down the line.

And again, I think there are ways after the fact, I've seen this a lot in the American national security community over the last 12 days, that we often try and reason backward from the actions that a given combatant like Hamas took and presume a greater strategy there, presume that they must have known X, Y, and Z would happen.

That often is not the way combatants in war operate from a planning stage to an execution stage from a strategic to an operational to a tactical level.

Should that be borne out by further reporting, probably speaks to the way that miscalculation is an underappreciated factor in every wartime combatant.

This is something I've seen up close and personally.

The ambitions we have, the opportunities we see, the desires that we have when we give into violence on an institutional level, blind us, not just in the banal way to the humanity of the people that come into our crosshairs, but to our own recognition of

what reality is and what's achievable here.

I hesitate to speculate or to put myself into a position of trying to read the minds of Hamas, all I can read are their statements and their actions, and through them, remember all of the times that I have seen optimistic to the point of irrationality statements from American, Israeli, all sorts of other combatants describing the glorious ways their war will go and why it will lead to the achievement of all of these grander objections that then go down in flames.

I would just add that although I don't know what Hamas expected, I do think it's important to remember that Hamas does have a multi-decade long history of intentionally targeting and killing civilians.

They did it during the Second Age of Fata in the early 2000s.

They did it during the 1990s, during the Oslo process.

So I don't think anyone should have been surprised that Hamas members would kill civilians. Maybe they hadn't had the opportunity to kill this many, but this is something that Hamas has repeatedly shown that it's willing to do.

And let me then build on that because as you say, this has been the most horrific of Hamas's attacks.

They have tried many things.

Nothing has, from perspective of pure murder, worked as well as this.

What is your sense of how the attack has changed?

Let me put it this way.

Both the politics and the mass psychology in Israel.

I think that the agony that Israelis are going through is unfathomable, greater than what Americans experienced after September 11th, greater just because as a share of the population it was much higher, greater because of the deeper level of trauma that Israeli Jews and other Jews carry, and greater because Al Qaeda was far away from us.

I mean, they came to New York and they were mostly in other parts of the world.

Hamas are on Israel's borders.

So that's, I think, the profound reality.

And I think there is, coexisting with that, a deep rage and anger at the Netanyahu government that eventually will probably produce some kind of political earthquake, but what kind of political earthquake we don't know.

And I think an absolute, resolute belief among Jewish Israelis, and it's important to remember that 20% of Israel's citizens are Palestinians, but among Jewish Israelis, I think overwhelming consensus that Hamas must be destroyed.

Now when you actually try to ask what that means, things become a lot more cloudy and I don't think people have good answers, but that gut level emotional reaction seems nearly consensus.

I want to put a pin in that question of what it means to destroy Hamas, but I want to get at something else in the psychology.

One of the things that has been very present for me in some of the more upsetting commentary right after Hamas's attacks, probably the commentary that couldn't imagine there being any such thing as an Israeli civilian.

One thing I noticed in that is a kind of rigid categorization of power in a matchup between

Israel and Palestinians and Gaza, Israel is by far the more powerful party and you can see that right now.

You can understand Israeli psychology at all, you can understand I think Jewish psychology at all without understanding the fear of genuine eradication at the center of it.

How many times Jews have been powerless, how many times Israel has faced in living memory and the memory of people who are in power there now attacks that if they had gone another way, would have wiped Israel off the map.

And so I wanted to get you to talk a bit about the way those two both realities and psychology is interplay, the sort of Israeli strength and the genuine felt sense that is a small place surrounded by people who would try to wipe it out if they could.

There's no question that those things are buried very deep for many, many Jews.

And then for Israelis exacerbated by the traumas that have taken place in Israel, this happened almost 50 years to the day from the Yom Kippur War, which was an extremely traumatic experience. Many, many Israelis have people who have been lost.

And I totally agree with you.

One of the things that really disturbed me about some of the commentary on the left was that there was a language of things like decolonization that erased the humanity of Israeli Jews.

And it reminded me of, this is something George Orwell wrote a lot about, the way in which certain kind of rhetorical formulations that people become very invested in then become a way of covering over the human realities of what's actually being done in their name.

And I felt that way about some of the language of decolonization.

Well, this is just what decolonization looks like, you know, if you have to break some eggs to make an omelet, so be it.

That is, to me, a kind of monstrous kind of thinking, very frightening.

I also think that this is fear that Israeli Jews has been fanned by a government that has dehumanized Palestinians and made it harder for Israeli Jews to see Palestinians as or ordinary people who have ordinary human desires, who mostly just want to live and be able to raise their kids in the same kinds of ways that we all want to do.

And I think because there has been so much dehumanization of Palestinians in Israel, it has made it even more difficult to see Palestinians in any other way than through, as essentially, the next group of people who threaten Jewish existence.

I want to ask you then about another side of this, which is how the attacks have changed psychology for Jews living outside Israel, and particularly those who have a very complicated or critical relationship with Israel, which I think describes everybody at the table here.

There's the period running up to this where the right-wing turn in Israeli politics, I think, began to sever a lot of ties people had.

I mean, my relationship to Israel had changed quite a bit as the left began to collapse there, as the peace process died, as Netanyahu and very, very, very far-right extremist cabinet ministers took and held power.

And there was also the attacks and the moment after them, and then there was a, I saw online and in a lot of people, I knew a real rupture between those same Jews, many of them who've worked for peace for a long time and what they were seeing among people they often thought of as their allies.

I've been watching a community, I'm part of, try to manage these two now very complicated relationships.

And I'm curious how you've experienced that, how you've seen it.

I genuinely believe that at the heart of Judaism is the metaphor of family.

This is what makes it different than Christianity and Islam.

Genesis is the story mostly of a family, and in the Exodus it becomes a nation, and it's imagined as a kind of extended family, Benay Israel, the children of Israel, Israel being the name that Isaac, that Jacob is given, sorry, after he wrestles with the angel.

So I believe that very, very deeply.

And so for me, this has awoken that in some really, really, really powerful ways.

And I struggle, and it's very, very difficult, to hold this sense of particular obligation, particular special connection that I feel to Israeli Jews, like Jews all over the world with the fact that I know that so many people in my community are weaponizing that and using that in a way to lobotomize us so that we don't care about what happens to Palestinians.

And so we are okay with whatever is done to them because we care only about our own families.

And that logic can become horrifying in the days to come.

So I have never felt as much of a sense of struggle with my own community and with my own love of a sense of community in trying to hold that and also be desperately afraid of the way in which it's leading some people to act.

Let's talk then, Spencer, about what is actually being done.

How would you describe what Israel is doing in response, both what the tactics are, what they have announced and shown themselves to be doing since Hamas's attack, and then what the broader strategy is.

What have they articulated or what do they appear to be trying to achieve?

Tactically, what Israel is producing is collective punishment against 2.3 million Gazans intensifying its strangulation of some of the most densely packed places on Earth, calling it as it will.

I started seeing reports that Gaza is without painkillers, that doctors are operating on wounded people of whom there are, I believe, more than 10,000 as of this recording without anesthesia.

This is Israel's tactics against Gaza, not against Hamas, against Gaza.

I want to go to the question of what Israel says it is trying to achieve for a second and how that matches up to what they're doing.

The main thing I have heard is that they're trying to destroy Hamas, eradicate Hamas.

I think a lot of people have heard this line from Yov Galan, the defense minister, where he says, we are fighting human animals and we act accordingly.

But I think if you just hear that line, you can interpret him as talking about Hamas.

But what he says right before that is, I've ordered a full siege of the Gaza Strip.

No power, no food, no water, no gas, everything is closed.

And if you're just going after Hamas, not allowing food, not allowing water, though they've turned some water back on according to recent reporting, not allowing gas, that's not a targeted anti-Hama strategy.

That's a strangulation of the Gaza people.

Yes.

And let's just skip to the day after what Netanyahu describes as a long war.

Israel can deal severe blows to human beings and has an unquestioned capability to perhaps kill members of Hamas and perhaps decapitate Hamas' leadership structure as well.

But there will be something that comes after whatever Israel's operation is.

And as long as Israel keeps the conditions of strangulation on Gaza, there will be something that comes after Hamas, whatever its form ends up taking.

And when we see Israel flattening buildings, taking these kinds of collective punishment measures, then it looks to me less like a war against Hamas and more like a calling of Palestinians in Gaza with Hamas as a proximate target.

One thing I have heard many people say now, and that includes many Palestinians, but it also now includes some Israelis who have called for this openly, like a member of the Knesset.

What Israel really wants to do here is what gets called the second Nakba, a second mass expulsion of Palestinians, creation of hundreds of thousands of refugees who don't or cannot come back.

And one reason people believe that is that there are those in the Israeli government who seem to want that before this.

And so the fear is that Hamas' atrocities become the excuse for something that the far-eyed in Israel could not have achieved before, but now it has a political and military space to try to achieve.

So can you first say what a Nakba is, what that word means in this context, and then whether you think that's a reasonable fear?

Yes.

So Nakba is the Arabic word for catastrophe, and it describes the experience in which more than half of the Palestinian population was expelled or fled in fear during Israel's war of independence between essentially 1947 and 1949.

But the point that Palestinians make again and again is that in a certain sense the Nakba never ended, because there have been expulsions that have continued, drips and drabs, there was another large one in 1967, in some ways it wouldn't even be the second Nakba.

You could actually say it would be the third Nakba, and smaller scale every year in between in various ways.

Most of the people in Gaza, and I don't think this is sufficiently recognized in the mainstream American press sometimes, are not from Gaza.

They are the children and grandchildren, and some are original refugees who were forced from what is now Israel.

And there is this profound collective trauma about the fact that this is happening again.

We know from what we've seen in the United States in recent years, the way that things in the deep history of a country, if they're never dealt with, if they're never acknowledged, if there's never a process of reparation and historical justice, they remain there waiting for a moment of trauma to come back.

So when Israel said, leave the northern Gaza strip and go to the southern Gaza strip, many Palestinians, especially elderly Palestinians were saying, I will not leave because this is happening again.

We know we will not be allowed to return.

This is a very, very real threat that exists at this moment, and the American government needs to have as it's one of its central policy goals to ensure that Joe Biden is not

judged by history as American president who allowed yet another knock about a take place on his watch.

I would add to that, before this past weekend, a tremendous amount of effort from the Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and the Biden administration was to create this, what they would call humanitarian corridor that they suggested would be a way of getting Palestinians out of Gaza into Sinai from the onslaught that Israel plans to put on Gaza.

And they had to hear not just from Palestinians, who I'm not sure that they really properly interacted with, but from the regional governments, that that was, and this was Blinken's term, a non-starter, because everyone in the region, Palestinian and non-Palestinian, recognized the historical reference point of the Nakba.

I talked on Sunday, right after this began happening, with a formerly Palestinian American who now lives in Turkey named Samuel Arian, someone whom the war on terror railroaded out of this country.

And I asked him about the intensification that Gaza was about to experience.

We were talking in the context of a piece I was doing for the nation about the Americans' efforts to put together a Saudi normalization with Israel in the context of the war.

And he said, what else can they do?

And I said, well, for instance, they could push you out of Gaza.

And he said, that's a fantasy.

That's a fantasy of the right.

We're not leaving.

And I can't stop thinking of these words that he said afterwards, which is that if we have to die, we'll die in our homes.

That now a government that purports to speak for the safety and national aspirations of Jews worldwide is inflicting upon another people.

I cannot think of a less Jewish thing than to make another person a refugee.

So recognizing Peter, this is a very hard question to put to anybody.

But something that I think people will think hearing this is, look, it's easy sitting in New York to criticize.

But as you said very eloquently earlier, one way this is different than 9-11 is that Israel and Gaza about each other, the West Bank, that everybody is crammed in together.

So what would a moral response be, and not just a moral response, but one that took seriously the Israeli people's need for security?

And also, and I think this is not just a fair but an important question of statecraft, that it can't be costless to slaughter Israeli civilians and take Israeli hostages.

I mean, no country on earth would allow that.

So first of all, there has to be an effort to bring back these captives.

And although this has very, very little purchase probably in Israel, I think if your number one overriding goal is the safety of those people, Israel would need to consider some kind of prisoner swap with Hamas, perhaps for elderly Palestinian prisoners who represent no actual threat once they leave prison.

I agree that the people who masterminded this attack, the people who carried those attacks, those people are war criminals, they should be dealt with, they should be brought to justice.

Beyond that, my fear is that Israel is going to go into Gaza on the ground looking for

security and safety.

And what it's ultimately going to get is less safety and less security than it has today. Isn't a mass prisoner swap for the hostages create the incentive for Hamas to do this again and again?

I mean, as Spencer said earlier, consensus view is one thing Hamas wanted out of this was a bunch of Israeli civilian hostages because they have done prisoner swaps in the past and they saw that as a way to do another one here to give them what they wanted on that. Doesn't that just create a reason for them to keep doing it to make this a successful strategy for them?

Absolutely.

Israel is a very real danger of that strategy, but I also fear that what Israel is doing now is going to lead ultimately to Hamas being stronger.

And I don't think that's because all those Palestinians who are supporting Hamas believe in the killing of civilians.

Some do tragically, but many don't.

It's because they have seen no other form of resistance that has gotten them anywhere. Israel has been blockading Gaza for 17 years.

When the blockade began, Hamas' rockets were these very, very primitive things.

17 years later, their arsenal is much more formidable than it was, and they were able to do this.

This is not a good trajectory to be on for the safety of Israelis.

There's an interesting piece by Amjad Iraqi in the London Review of Books, and he writes, Young Palestinians, many of whom were raised under the false promises of the Oslo Accord, signed 30 years ago last month, have been taking up arms and joining local militias unaffiliated with the major political parties.

On the streets and online, Palestinian activists no longer care to tiptoe around diplomatic language or references to international laws that have failed them.

I feel like it's something we've seen before, that even if you imagine a world where Israel is quite successful in smashing Hamas, that doesn't necessarily mean the world you get is no extremist violent groups dedicated to killing Israelis.

What you might get is a splintering into somewhat yet more extreme and dangerous groups that have no political arm whatsoever, which Hamas is this weird kind of, it has a political arm, it has a military arm.

You've watched this kind of thing happen before, so I'm curious what you make of it.

It reminds me a little bit of sort of the pre-ISIS conversation and the post-ISIS conversation, and ISIS has been back here as a metaphor a lot, but as you mentioned in peace, sort of not being used is the way you might think that metaphor would be used.

When the United States invaded Iraq, there was barely any al-Qaeda presence there.

That quickly changed, and it became home to the most violent, nihilistic, and ambitious affiliate of al-Qaeda.

And then when the United States in 2006, 2007, 2008 believed that it had dealt a fatal blow to that organization, that along with the Syrian civil war next door, combined to create an enemy far greater, far more loathsome and terrifying than the one that the United States went into Iraq to stop.

We have seen this again and again and again in conditions of occupation, apartheid, strangulation, whereby as these conditions persist, they don't empower the levelist heads among us, they create despair and despair will have a reaction.

Despair will emerge in ways that we who do not experience that despair will find barbaric, probably correctly so in many cases, and more importantly, won't anticipate.

Only when you deal at the root with addressing the fundamental conditions of that despair can this dynamic change at all.

And to expect this to be an exception is to be blind to a history that we have seen unfold, not just in our lifetimes, but across 75 years of Israeli history and American sponsorship. People act as if this conflict began with Hamas.

Palestinians were fighting against Israel and Zionism, including by killing civilians.

For instance, in the hijackings of the 1970s, the 1972 Munich Olympics.

And that was not Hamas.

Hamas didn't exist.

That wasn't Islamist.

Those were largely, a lot of them were leftist Palestinian organizations.

So anyone who thinks you are going to end Palestinian attacks on civilians, even if you could get rid of Hamas, unless you deal with the root of the violence of oppression, it seems to me, is kidding themselves.

Something you often hear said is why isn't there a nonviolent Palestinian movement?

Why can't this be more like the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa?

Why can't it be more like the Gandhian independence movement in India?

And you wrote a great piece for the times kind of thinking through particularly the South African comparison.

So how do you contrast that?

And what is your answer to why the path of violence has been chosen and the path of nonviolence seems so now dormant?

Well, the Africa National Congress was not nonviolent.

In the early 1960s, they actually adopted armed struggle, and yet they worked pretty hard to not go after civilians.

They felt like that was a moral red line, rightly.

And the argument that I made in my piece, of course, there are many, many differences between these two situations, is to understand how the ANC was able to maintain that moral code in which at one point they took responsibility and virtually apologized after some of their cadres, their commandos, had killed civilians, was that their moral strategy was working.

They saw that by the 1980s, an anti-apartheid movement had emerged across the world, including in the United States, led by the black community in the United States in particular, that had gotten to impose sanctions, that had led to divestment efforts, and it produced a virtuous cycle that made it easier for them to maintain their moral core.

Now, Hamas has never had the same moral core that the ANC had to be clear, but there are many Palestinians who have spoken in the language of human rights and international law and coexistence

and opposed violence against civilians and called for boycotts and called for sanctions and tried to go to the International Criminal Court and tried to go to the United Nations.

Tragically, in my view, unlike what we were able to do in America in the 1980s, which was to strengthen and empower those people, those people have been shut down, not just defeated but often criminalized.

I'm not saying that everyone needs to sign up to every aspect of the boycott divestment sanction movement, but if there is no form of ethical or nonviolent Palestinian resistance that you support, then you are just telling Palestinians they should accept their oppression in silence, you are going to empower Hamas.

Not just accept their oppression in silence, disappear from the face of the earth.

Every single day, Palestinians experience violence.

That was true before October 7th, it is true certainly in the wake of it.

What happened to a Palestinian nonviolent effort?

Well, part of it is Israel killed those people, Israel put their leaders in jail.

I'm so old that I remember, I guess back in the mid-2000s when people talked about the importance of releasing Marwan Bargoudi from prison on the idea that he was away out of the PLO and Hamas in a different way.

Do you want to say who he is?

A Palestinian leader who tried to forge a different path, who emerged from conditions of violent resistance but was trying to move toward a different form of national struggle.

This also is an important point here.

The United States, as a matter of policy, suppressed that.

The United States rejected Palestinian aspirations at the United Nations, vetoed resolutions.

Peter probably knows more than I do how many states in the United States it is forbidden to have any involvement with boycott, divestment, and sanctions where there are penalties for state interaction with those movements and those efforts.

More fundamentally, continued to fund and arm Israel and provide it diplomatic support while it suppressed legitimate Palestinian national aspirations.

And so I find it a little frustrating, certainly not as frustrating as a Palestinian would, but frustrating to hear from people who have no intention of honoring and bringing about Palestinian national aspirations that they just don't do it the right way.

The fact of the matter is people deserve freedom because they are people.

And that, I think, speaks to a reality that we as Americans tend not to acknowledge.

And my son, Spencer, is that in the same period, there's this very sharp break around the role America is trying to play.

Barack Obama didn't get a lot done here, but one thing he did try to do, more so than any president since Carter, was challenge Israel on the settlements.

And I would say he had a showdown with Netanyahu on that and he lost.

That only did he lose.

I remember in 2010 when Joe Biden went as an envoy to secure sort of the first steps toward a return to the peace process, and Netanyahu's response was to announce more settlement construction.

A very direct snap.

I mean, that was very, very calculated.

And it was hard not to think about that as Netanyahu and Biden embraced.

Forgive me for being the war on terror guy who constantly goes back to the war on terror,

but among the things that happened during that period was the war on terror in which the position of the United States, certainly beginning in September of 2001, was that Israel was fighting in microcosm, the circumstance that the United States was fighting.

And accordingly, there was no appetite to prompt Israel to return to any kind of negotiating posture when the prevailing view in Washington and certainly embraced by the Israelis because of how well it suited them was that the Palestinians were no different functionally from Al Qaeda. And that was a false equivalence that many in American politics and media were not particularly inclined to question.

And as those conditions continued, Israel built its wall around the West Bank, which was a term people policed very heavily, so as not to call it a wall.

And I think it's very obvious that it was and remains a wall, that the United States reached the thing that we constantly talk about in this day and age, not reaching which is normalization, normalization of the persistent immiseration of the Palestinian people, normalization

of the sense that I think Peter is discussed quite eloquently of, and Tarek Bakoni cited as well, a certain equilibrium that we saw on October 7th where it leads, that if you would simply find a way to ignore Palestinian national aspirations and the basic facts of Palestinian material life, that the region would simply move on, that Israel would find normalization from the Gulf States and eventually Saudi Arabia.

And whatever else it is that Hamas might have sought to achieve, unrealistically, through its attacks beginning on October 7th, that equilibrium has indeed been shattered.

And the United States were it to recognize itself as a central actor that it in fact is in this conflict would come to a deep reckoning of the way in which it enabled this circumstance to take root and adjust course accordingly.

I've been very struck watching Biden.

A lot of what he has said, actually as opposed to things that have come out elsewhere in his administration, I felt has been pretty on point.

But the degree of immediate locking arms with Israel and Netanyahu, knowing him a bit and knowing his history on these issues, knowing his fury after what happened with Netanyahu in the Obama administration, I've wondered a little bit about his kind of longer term play that something that was happening in Israeli-American politics is Israel's becoming right wing coded.

It was becoming something that Democrats had more complicated feelings on, Netanyahu had embraced Trump very fulsomely.

Joe Biden is a guy who likes to imagine himself like one of the great diplomatic presidents of all time.

You know, as a Senate foreign relations chair, he likes doing his shuttle diplomacy.

And he seems to me to be trying to rebuild a role for America as a broker, possibly at the cost of its capability of bringing together other players in the region, but trying to rebuild its influence in Israel, hopefully with on his part some end game.

But that has struck me as a possible way of reading just a level of intense support and kind of political capital.

He's invested in this immediately.

The people who formed the highest echelons of the Biden administration were the people

who formed the second highest echelons of the Obama administration.

And particularly amongst his Middle East people, their takeaway from the experience is that Obama's instincts throughout the Middle East failed and were a mess, that toward the end of the Obama administration, after the Iran deal, there was a strain that I think it's fair to say the Biden administration has run with is the centrality of its foreign policy toward the Middle East.

And that is, embrace the old autocrats as hard as you can, embrace the Petra States as hard as you can, recognize that nothing you will want to see accomplished in the rest of the world will happen unless you unwind things like the way that Biden called Saudi Arabia a pariah state.

It took the better part of a year for that to unwind.

And a central aspect of that experience was seeing the ways in which efforts by Obama to impose the barest outlines of a political settlement for a two-state solution on Israel came to nothing but tears, needless antagonism and struggle and the acceleration of that, what you call right-wing codedness.

Biden wants none of that smoke, absolutely none of it.

I think it is fair to question, after October 7th, the degree to which that strategy lies in ruins to simply look past as so much of the world and look past Israeli apartheid and the conditions of Palestinian deprivation and consider that a footnote to a glorious history in which the United States has this seamless interoperable network.

This is often how they describe it from a security perspective in which it is the security guarantor of the Middle East and relations in the region with a rising China remain commercial and transactional and that will secure the American position in the Middle East for generations to come.

It doesn't look like that's really working out.

And we should also just say, we have not seen the end of the way this war looks.

Every day I wake up scared and checking the news feeds to see if a second front has opened up in southern Lebanon.

That's a real possibility here.

The United States has two aircraft carrier strike groups, quite possibly to assist in an assault should Hezbollah decide to enter the war in force, at which point you really do have an expanded regional war that the United States is indirectly.

And I don't know if the United States has really thought through the degree to which it itself is very close to being a combatant in this conflict.

I'm curious what you read and what the United States wants here.

I think the most generous interpretation is that Biden believes that if he hugs Netanyahu and he wins credibility among Israelis, he may have the leverage to behind the scenes restrain what Israel does.

So it's not totally apocalyptic.

It doesn't spur the regional war or the overthrow of the Jordanian regime or the overthrow of Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank, that he can do that behind the scenes, that he kind of reasons that Obama didn't have credibility in Israel, partly because of who he was, but partly because of public confrontation.

So he's going to do the opposite.

But I think history will not be kind to the Biden administration's way of approaching with this.

They just didn't have any stomach for any political fight in Washington to do anything for the Palestinians and essentially acted as if that could just be managed as they went off to fight their new Cold War with China and then to deal with Russia.

And they contributed to this feeling among Palestinians that they were being more and more marginalized, that they were more and more hopeless.

And that contributed, that empowered Hamas to take this action.

And so part of the problem is they have accepted a political reality in Washington that essentially says you can't have a fight with Israel.

But by accepting that political reality, they have also strengthened that political reality. If a democratic president had tried to do something different, given what we see among polling shifts, among Democrats out there in a country and actually lead lead, he could have potentially changed the politics.

Instead what Joe Biden has done is he's essentially strengthened a kind of consensus in Washington that many grassroots Democrats don't support.

And by doing so, I think he contributed to this explosion.

But do you think it changes now?

I mean, do you think there is something to the idea that if Biden is able to win back credibility for sort of democratic administration in Israel at a point of weakness for Netanyahu when the US government at this point was doing a lot of deals and working with the Gulf States?

I mean, the idea that the equilibrium, you can just forget about the Palestinian problem has been shattered is true in America too, right?

That's true for the Biden administration too.

I do not want to suggest that like all this ends in a happy ending.

I basically couldn't believe anything further from the truth.

But I do wonder if there is not an opening here.

If things do not go too far off the rails in the immediate near term to try to begin the work that was being done before of, you know, are there not deals that can be made?

Are there not people who can be empowered?

Is there not some legacy other than the continuing dissolution of this?

I think it would be very difficult with this Israeli government, given how radical it is.

And I fear that the Biden administration, if it manages to somehow avert a regional catastrophe, will kind of go back and say, okay, things are now okay now.

The best case scenario might be in the short term that there is some Israeli election that produces some kind of political earthquake.

Now, that political earthquake could lead Israel even further to the right.

We have no idea really what it would mean, but things have been deeply destabilized.

And in the best case scenario, perhaps you might, especially because of the forces that were leading against this judicial overhaul, that maybe there could be some new political leadership in Israel that Biden could work with and do something that no American government and no Israeli government has ever done, which is restrained settlement growth, for instance.

We've never done that.

Israel has never done that, even during the peace process.

That would be, I think, the best case scenario.

It wouldn't even bring us close to some kind of resolution, but it might at least create some kind of hope for Palestinians that they're not just looking into despair as far as the eye can see.

One thing that was in the PC world, Peter, is a kind of idea that I've been thinking about since then of the tactics that generate a response, generate a kind of success, then empower the people behind them.

And you get into these cycles, right?

Hardliners have a tendency to empower hardliners.

Hamas throws rockets at Israel and gets some concessions.

Hamas kidnaps an Israeli soldier and actually does get a prisoner swap, and that makes Hamas look stronger.

Netanyahu's government is able to kind of wall off the Palestinians and build an iron dome and fortify the wall, and attacks are going down, and that makes them look stronger.

Or similarly, there's an attack, and now you need the hard right.

You need the more military-oriented leaders because, of course, you have to avenge the attack.

And so you write that in the case of South Africa, that ethical resistance elicited international support and international support made ethical resistance easier to sustain.

And in Israel today, the dynamic is almost exactly the opposite.

So I guess this raises this kind of deep question for me, which is I've long ago given up on the idea that there is some kind of fantasy deal-making to imagine here, right?

Like that I can kind of in my head imagine the land swaps and the right-of-return dynamics and all the things that would get to a deal that I think the thing you're getting at in that piece, which is really quite powerful, is that until there are different empowered actors, there can be no deal.

You have to change the political economy of the whole thing.

You have to change who has strength.

And I'm curious how you think that gets done.

We're so far away from it, but I do think that one thing would be really important is 20% of Israel's citizens are Palestinians.

They are a really important group of people because, although they're severely discriminated against, they're the only Palestinians who actually have the ability to act politically to vote.

The problem in Israeli politics, one major problem, is that there is no genuine joint Jewish and Palestinian party.

The parties are essentially all based on tribe, on various different kinds of tribes.

And so you don't have a party that even models the vision of the kind of politics that I would ultimately like to see.

And if there was if there's such a party could emerge and speak to Israelis and Palestinians because it would be composed of Israelis and Palestinians and say, the way we behave in this party, coming together around a vision of humanity and equality under the law and liberal democracy and fighting for it together as Jews and Palestinians inside Israel, I think that could resonate around the whole world and show a model of what might be possible.

We desperately need models of what's possible now for people not to lose all hope.

I agree that it looks as far away as it's ever looked.

But at the same time, I remember that when the United States imposes conditions on its allies and foreign clients, quite a great deal that doesn't seem possible could in fact become possible.

If the United States is, as the Biden administration has done thus far, simply express solidarity with Israel, give it accelerated ammunition shipments, then we won't have any of those incentives created.

We won't have any actors who could break this dynamic empowered.

We won't have movements and constituencies for Palestinian liberation taken seriously and sat across a negotiating table from Israel.

I don't pretend that my perspective holds much in the way of a constituency in Israel right now.

So I want to speak with some humbleness.

But the thing is, what's possible is very often different from what's necessary.

And only when people of conscience hold true to what's necessary, can we start to expand the limits of what is possible until finally a way pointing out of this horrific reality can come to pass.

And that's something that is not something that Israel would be granting Palestinians.

It would be something Israel would be performing for the survival of its own people, the people who we have particularly in the Jewish community in Israel and around the world been agonizing over the fate of.

I want to make sure some of the competing Israeli narratives are felt here.

And one of the very dominant ones has been that there were efforts towards peace or many, many peace processes.

And obviously the narratives of what happened at places like Camp David and in this or that negotiation are highly contested.

I'm not going to try to untangle them here, but that it fundamentally to many Israelis didn't work.

There wasn't enough of a negotiating partner in the fadas got launched, there were still rockets coming over, there were suicide bombings.

And then it seemed to me, and this was a very depressing thing to watch happen, that a new consensus emerged.

Like we're done with that.

The far-right in Israel is highly empowered.

We're going to cordon off Gaza, cordon off the West Bank, have a blockade on Gaza, build the Iron Dome, build the wall, have intelligence operations mow the lawn by which it was a very bloodless way of saying launch repeated attacks, try to degrade the capabilities of Hamas in particular and other terrorist groups.

And that within that there are demands placed if this is going to change on the Palestinians too.

I mean, and particularly now that Israel has just suffered this attack.

And so I'm curious how you think about that side of it as well.

And in particular, what builds trust for Israelis?

Right.

And that's why I, like Spencer, am so afraid of the idea of mass ethnic cleansing. Because I think if you've written off the possibility of giving people equality within the country in which they live, which is essentially Israel because they live under Israeli control in various ways, and you have given up on the idea of partition and says that no longer possible, and you've given up on this idea of what the Palestinian writer, Tark Bakoni calls the kind of violent equilibrium in which you can manage this, then what are you left with?

But the idea of trying to get those people out of there, I would say, first of all, it is very important for Israeli Jews and people around the world to know that there are Palestinians who have condemned these attacks, who have said that it is fundamentally antithetical to them to take civilian life of any group.

I'm an Odeff, for instance, who's just about the most important, one of the most important Palestinian political leaders in Israel who says that unequivocally, Adallah, an organization of Palestinian Israelis, there have been people who have said that.

I think it's really important that we don't lose their voices in this.

On the question of what happened during all these negotiations, both Palestinians and Israeli Jews believe that the other side was not acting in good faith.

If you really go through all of the details, I think what you come to view at the end of the day is that they had two different conceptions of what this partition would look like. They could never be bridged.

But since Netanyahu came back to power in 2009, we have not had an Israeli government that has been interested in a Palestinian state on any terms.

Even if you say that Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas deserve blame for what happened in 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, and I think there is blame to go around, the problem with blaming the Palestinians since 2009 is there has been no Israeli partner to even test their willingness to accept the idea of a Palestinian state near the 1967 lines in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. So let me begin to bring this to a close and not with sort of imaginings of a deal that isn't going to happen, but with a sort of more direct question, which is, I agree with your point, Peter, that with this Israeli government, it's very hard to imagine that kind of change.

Who are figures, political leaders, thinkers, people with a constituency of some sort on both sides of the conflict?

Who you all have seen, heard from, and are the kind of people you wish would begin to hold more power?

Are there people who are for you folks charting a pathway forward that has some glimmers of something different?

I think Ivan Oda is someone who does not command a substantial constituency in Israel and we shouldn't underestimate the left's nearly 20-year marginalization in Israel, but as Peter pointed out earlier, is someone whose politics represents something outside of the zero-sum nature of what Israeli politics and that we're seeing with the Netanyahu government represents.

Like Peter says, we don't know the direction of a government that may take shape in response to fury at Netanyahu that Israelis have expressed for the last nearly two weeks over this, but

that fury is not necessarily a left-wing fury.

That fury very often has to do with the ways in which Netanyahu's gamble did not yield security.

The question is going to be, what Israelis take away from that lesson?

Was the failure in security simply a failure of sufficiently militarizing Israel toward the south and away from the West Bank, or was it a more fundamental failure in which the policy of keeping Hamas strong and funded in order to never have to divest Israel of the West Bank was the fundamental failure here?

Peter, do you have any other people who spring to mind in that?

Yes.

I think I mentioned in passing this group, which is in English called Standing Together, led by Sally Abed and Alonley Green and many others.

An organization of Israeli and Palestinian citizens who under the most extraordinarily difficult circumstances, especially now where they're literally facing state repression, have tried to offer a vision of Israeli Jews and Palestinians standing together for mutual safety, mutual equality, and coexistence, and those people give me hope.

Are there any politicians in Israel that you find, and here I mean actually Jewish politicians, the collapse of the Israeli left has been so stark from when I started being involved in this issue in my 20s or in my teens.

Does anybody feel to you like they have any hope of reviving something?

The problem is in this, I think, in this idea of the Jewish left.

We would not talk in the United States about the white left or the Christian left.

Inherent in being in the left is you don't stand for tribe.

The problem in Israeli politics is there is not a robust politics that essentially sees itself as neither Jewish nor Palestinian.

There is a Jewish member of the Knesset in the Khadash party, which is a mostly Palestinian party.

That man, Ofer Kasif, was just basically banned from the Knesset for 45 days for public statements he made, just to give you a sense of how difficult it is to occupy that.

But those are the people that I look to.

And then always our final question, what are a few books you'd recommend to the audience?

And Spencer, why don't I start with you?

Sure.

So three books, and I appreciate the question, Ezra.

First I would recommend reading The Hundred Years' War on Palestine by the historian Rashid Khalidi.

That is a very accessible Palestinian history as pressy to the conflict beginning of the 20th century to the early 21st.

A shattering book that people really ought to read is The Oral History of the Palestinian Nakba that's edited by Nahlah Abdo and Noor Masalha.

Reading the history from the people who experienced the Nakba around 1948 and periods both before

and after is for those who know Jewish history, shattering in its familiarity and reading as well the accounts of people who survived the Nakba, who talk about how these were their neighbors, people that they loved, their children played with, who they had all sorts of social

relationships with for a long period of time.

Turn on them and force them away is a shattering thing to remember and to hear.

And then finally, I would recommend Benny Morris and my former Guardian colleague Ian Black's book, *Israel's Secret Wars*, which is a history of the rise of the Israeli intelligence services and their role in statecraft in Israel.

Also has some simply incredible stories that are amazing to believe are true.

Peter.

Since this has been a conversation among Jews and I know you're going to have Palestinian guests, I'm going to mention three books by Palestinians, not because there are not so many books by Israeli Jews that I love, but just because since Palestinians have often had, as Edward Said said this, not had this permission to narrate, I think it's really important in this moment that their voices be elevated.

The first is Edward Said's classic book, *The Question of Palestine* in 1979, which really lays out the Palestinian experience.

And what I love about that book and find so moving about it is it's a very, very profound critique of Zionism and yet Said is such a humanist that he's also able to describe in that book to understand why Zionism was so appealing to so many Jews and why many Jews found it liberating even as he found it to be oppressive and Palestinians did.

The second is Rajesh Shahada's memoir, *Strangers in the House*, Spencer mentioned the Nakba. This is the story of growing up in a family of people who were expelled and it gives you a kind of an intimate glimpse into that refugee experience, which is so central to the Palestinian experience and yet I feel like so often is missing from the American discourse about Israel-Palestine.

And the third is, we've mentioned Tarek Bakoni before, Tarek Bakoni's book *Hamas Contained*. It's a book about Hamas, which has no illusions, which is very, very critical in parts, but describes the history of Hamas as a political organization that one can understand certain decisions it's made in response to certain incentives.

And if there is to be a better future for Israelis and Palestinians than the one that Hamas envisioned, part of that will require understanding Hamas better so that Jews and Palestinians together can create better alternatives.

Spencer Ackerman, Peter Bynart.

Thank you very much.

Thank you, Rezver.

Thank you.

This episode of the Ezra Klein Show was produced by Roland Hu.

Fact-checking by Michelle Harris with Mary Marge Locker and Kate Sinclair.

Our senior engineer is Jeff Geld.

Our senior editor is Claire Gordon.

The show's production team includes Emma Fogawa and Kristen Lin, original music by Isaac Jones, audio and strategy by Christina Samilowski and Shannon Busta.

The executive producer of New York Times' opinion audio is Annie Rose Strasser and special thanks to Sonya Herrero.