

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / War in Israel: Michael Oren Explains How 'Evil' Infiltrated the Country

I'm Barry Weiss. This is Honestly, and I'm here right now with historian Michael Oren, former Israeli ambassador to the United States, former member of Israel's Knesset, to help us answer the many questions that are running through my head, and maybe yours right now, of what many are already calling Israel's 9-Eleven. Michael Oren, thank you for making the time.

Yeah, I fear it must be even worse than 9-Eleven, because although there was a tragic, tragic loss of life on 9-Eleven, America's enemies did not invade America's soil. America's enemies did not cart off what would be proportionately hundreds or even thousands of American hostages.

And one does not want to compare tragedy and tragedy, but for the state of Israel, I think this is a greater tragedy even, even than the Yom Kippur War of exactly 50 years ago. Some people who are watching the news or just scrolling through the New York Times might not have a sense of the magnitude of what just has happened over the past less than 24 hours. Let me just go through some of the images, and I'm going to try not to cry that I have been seeing this morning and last night. Terror is going door-to-door hunting people down. A mother, a hostage cradling two redhead babies in her arm. An old woman, probably a grandmother, being forced to pose with a Hamas rifle. The dead, half-naked body of a young woman. On a stolen IDF vehicle, being dragged into Gaza by Hamas militants, being mutilated. Teenagers running through for their lives at a music festival, kind of like Burning Man, one of those girls. Being thrown on a motorcycle, being taken hostage into Gaza as she screams to be let go. The mayor of Shahr Hanegov, Ofer Libstein, murdered. Desperate Israelis calling in to radio stations, begging for help from inside their safe rooms while terrorists are on the other side of the door. And meantime, on WhatsApp and Signal, friends texting me from inside Israel saying this is only a fraction of what's going on. What am I missing there, Michael?

Let's say this for the outset. The New York Times headline right now is, Netanyahu Declares War. I'm listening to the American media, and the very simple fact that Israel has been the victim of an outrageous, unprecedented, murderous, vicious assault has almost been lost. There is already the well-known moral equivalency on many US TV channels where they're showing the number of Israeli dead. The run for Palestinians killed so far. Sue will be hearing the D word, Barry. Disproportionality. Wait for that. What you don't hear is what I hear from my family. All of my family on all sides are in bomb shelters tonight. They've already heard about the parents of children in the kindergarten who have been killed. They've heard about people who are missing, including young people who are at that music festival who are missing. One cannot begin to calculate. Beside the loss of human life and the maiming of, apparently, of at least 1,000 of Israelis is the unspeakable, emotional, traumatic impact of this. There is no cycle here. There's no symmetry here. The minute that starts, we in Israel, we who speak for Israel, and I'm not in a positional capacity anymore, Barry, we have to come out and remind whosoever listening out there that Israel is the target here and there is no equivalency. There's no equivocation. There's no symmetry. One of the reasons I think it's really important to pause and sort of look at the evil that we have been seeing in these images and videos is because we know how this goes. Two, three, four days from now, the horror of this day is going to be condensed into a half-sentence

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reference. As Israel surely will invade Gaza and perhaps this will broaden and we'll talk about this into a broader regional war, but I think it's very, very important to pause and look at what actually occurred today. If you read the headlines, you will hear about militants attacking so-called settlers. What is actually happening is that innocent people are being hunted down in their homes. I just got sent a list that someone put together, reminded me a lot of the list that were put together after 9-11, of people desperately searching for their missing friends and relatives. I heard another report from a friend, unverified, but of people at Niti vote searching through body bags for their relatives right now. Michael, your family is in Israel right now. Where are they? Tell us a little bit about what's going on for them. They're all in bomb shelters right now and getting through the night, but they're receiving words about tragedies that have struck other families that they know. We are a small country. You know, Barry, everyone knows everybody. You can't have hundreds of Israelis dead. Who knows how many Israelis taking prisoners? How many Israelis wounded? Everybody's going to know somebody. Now, everybody is being called up. I have two assistants I work with. They've both been called up. They've called me on the way to the army. Everybody's been involved. Barry, this is just the beginning. This is, first of all, we haven't seen Israel's response yet, and it's going to be on a massive scale. This is not going to be business of interval. We've had five rounds of fighting with Hamas. These really public will not countenance a return to the status quo, but that is just the beginning. We have led to see what Hamas is going to do in Judea and Samaria, the West Bank. We haven't seen what Hisbola is going to do in the north with 150,000 rockets pointed at our neighborhoods and schools. Most of them buried under 200 villages in southern Lebanon. So the Israeli army has been training to go village to village, house to house. But you can imagine. You can imagine what a catastrophe that will be. And we haven't seen, frankly, what Israeli Arabs are going to do yet. We haven't seen the possibility of terrorist attacks against Jewish institutions across the world, including in this country, Barry, including this country. I've now heard that there are Jewish institutions that are closing, barring the doors, sending kids home from Hebrew school. I think that's a wise move, frankly. And we haven't seen the beginning of it. And the big question is, first of all, of course, how Israel will unite, again, after being so deeply divided over so many issues, to defend our homeland, to defend our homes and our families, but also how the United States and the world will act. And I think the world is watching very carefully. America's response to this. There's so much we don't yet know. We're still in the early hours of what's already been declared a war. But the obvious question here that everyone, I think, is looking with mouths agape is, how did this happen? How did Hamas terrorists this morning, on Shabbat, on a Jewish holiday, stream across Israel's borders in pickup trucks, on foot, by motorcycles, paragliders, even boats? People think of Israel as one of the most sophisticated and militarized societies in the world, which it's had to become out of necessity given its neighbors. People think of Israel as a fortress. It's supposed to have the world's most powerful surveillance software. It's supposed to have eyes on Gaza at all times. It's supposed to have the Iron Dome to protect it from rockets. The number one question I think on people's minds is, how could this have happened? We don't know yet. And that's going to be the subject, I'm sure, of a very intense and deep commission, a national state commission investigation, when the smoke clears,

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if and when the smoke clears. And it is not the time to start pointing thinkers right now. It just isn't. It's very easy. One can begin to talk about the divisions within the Israeli society and who caused those divisions, the impression that we were vulnerable. And one can take it further and say, okay, who was responsible for creating the impression that America is also vulnerable, that America is unwilling to stand behind its allies. One can look, I think, and this is something I've been deeply concerned about for many weeks now, is the possibilities created for war created by the impending peace agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as Iran is getting increasingly nervous. Nervous about the possible threat of a possible threat of a Saudi nuclear threshold capability, concerned about the return of Donald Trump to office, and was looking perhaps for an opportunity to destabilize the region, to upend that peace process. I don't think anybody's talking about Saudi Israeli peace today. So from an Israeli perspective, this is very successful. And Iran has immense influence over Hamas and over the Gaza Strip, and not just there. So there are many factors to be investigated. Right now, the major issue is defending the state and people of Israel. Period. And I would hope that the Biden administration and our allies elsewhere in the world will stand by us, and don't buy into these headlines that somehow Israel had it coming to it for the quote unquote for the occupation, or for not creating a Palestinian state. This is Hamas, which opposes the creation of a Palestinian state because that would mean peace with Israel, and it is determined and about to destroy the state of Israel. It's about to destroy the Palestinian Authority as well, which is in theory willing to negotiate. This is a murderous, Islamist, jihadist group. And there's a great and terrible cautionary tale to this as well, Barry. Not just for Israel. Truly what you said. Israel, a country which probably has the best border defenses in the world, some of the best intelligence services in the world, all of those abilities which you mentioned, and yet, and yet, this still could happen. That's the cautionary tale for Americans, and I think for the free world everywhere. Right now, hundreds of rockets are raining down in Tel Aviv. Everyone we both know, especially you, is in bomb shelters. And from what I'm reading, the IDF is still battling in something like a dozen locations to recapture land inside Israel that's being controlled by terrorists. I don't know if this is still accurate, but as of 30 minutes ago, dozens of members of Kibbutz Baeri have been held hostage in the dining hall, and the Israeli army has not been able to get there to let them out. What are the other flashpoints that are still unfolding right now as we speak? We don't know. We don't know the extent to which, again, Hamas will be activated in Jerusalem among the settlements of Judea and Samaria, Hezbollah, and whether this is already happening, whether Hezbollah is already mobilizing. There's always a deep concern about elements within the Israeli Arab community may try to block major roads, as the army has to mobilize along those major roads. Many, many possibilities. The major thrust right now would be to release those hostages, hopefully at minimal cost, and to clear Israel proper of terrorist presence, and that's going to take a long time. We were very focused for years on the tunnels, Baeri, and we developed this revolutionary technology for tunnel detection. I know because I was involved in liaising between that technology and Homeland Security in the United States, because America has a tunnel problem, too. We were so focused on what was going on beneath the ground, perhaps we were amiss and not paying enough attention to what was going above the

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ground, and even in the sky above us. This is not the first time Israel has been attacked by hang gliders. It was an infamous hang glider attack in the late 1980s in the United States, which is in Israel, and it's remembered to this day. It's not without precedent. Drones, we know that Hamas has developed a very advanced drone capability with the Iranian backing. So I can't tell you, nobody can tell you. I'm not sure, even in the army, they entirely know the extent of the terrorist penetration of our settlements, of our farms, our communities, our cities. Michael, is the press in Israel reporting how many terrorists remain inside Israel right now? Is there any kind of estimate? Is there any kind of estimate about how many hostages have been taken? There is, but it is only a estimate, and it's highly classified right now. Okay, and the number of Israelis who have been killed, I think the number, the official number was something like 200, but do you estimate that it's much higher than that? Yes, I do, and it'll get much higher, because I said this can very easily mushroom into a regional conflagration. I actually don't see how Hamas elsewhere and Hezbollah sit on the sidelines. I don't understand how they would remain passive if Israel, as I expect, will launch a ground operation in Toghaza, if for no reason than to release the hostages, but beyond that to change the status quo. And there should be thought even now about the day after. I know that's a difficult thing right now, but I've often, you know, I've either fought in or been involved in the diplomacy surrounding five rounds of fighting with Hamas, and the issue always comes up. If Israel takes over Gaza and we're at the end of the day, we're left holding the keys to Gaza, who's going to take the keys from us? And that is a question which American and Israeli decision makers should be addressing even now, the day after, because I strongly believe that a ground operation, not a limited ground operation, we haven't had an in-depth ground operation in Gaza since 2002, Operation Defense of Shield by Arik Chiron, when the Israeli army moved very deeply into Gaza, and then of course we pulled out in 2005. We're talking about an extensive combat field, a densely populated, highly prepared, on behalf of Hamas, booby-trapped mind. Every conceivable threat to human life will be facing Israeli soldiers going house to house in Gaza, searching for these hostages. We have to prepare it in many ways, and I think from my perspective, and I say this humbly, my perspective is to fight on the war on this computer screen. It's to remind people all the time how this war started, why it started, it was not about the absence of a peace process, it wasn't about the absence of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, on the 67 borders, even the division of Jerusalem, it's not about any of that. What's it about? It's about a terrorist Hamas, Islamist, jihadist organization, determined to kill Jews, determined to destroy the Jewish state. There's going to be a lot of a fuscation around this, a lot of attempts again to establish that symmetry, and we're going to have to fight against it, because you mentioned earlier in a couple of days it's all going to be forgotten. I remember in the second Lebanon in 2006, and I fought in that war, it was started when Hezbollah attacked an Israeli patrol and killed eight soldiers and captured two. Within two or three days, I was interviewing on American media, and they were saying, well, Israel started this war, and had a pause and say, wait a minute, no one had any recollection event, any recollection of how that war started. We talked about 9-11 earlier in this conversation, you say that in many ways this is worse than 9-11, at least by some measures. The other event, of course, that comes to mind, in my mind, I'm sure yours, is the war that broke out 50 years and one day ago today. That, of course, is the Yom Kippur War, in which Egypt,

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in the south, and Syria, in the north, surprised, attacked Israel on the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Earlier today, at least in Israel, was Shabbat, also another Jewish holiday, total surprise. Of course, in that war, it changed Israel forever. It was a war that Israel very nearly lost. Now, the difference here, of course, one of them is that the enemies today are inside Israel. But how do you think that the echoes of the Yom Kippur War are playing out in the minds of Israelis? And if you could, draw out that analogy for us a little bit.

Certainly, certainly. And again, I never want to compare tragedy with tragedy. But this is in many ways worse than the Yom Kippur War. Well, again, in the Yom Kippur War, there was some warning. The warnings weren't necessarily heeded. We don't know what kind of warnings the government received, the army received. Israel had several hours at least to prepare. Apparently, there was no preparation at all here. As you mentioned, during the Yom Kippur War, Egyptian soldiers penetrated the Sinai Peninsula. Syrians penetrated the Golan Heights, captured nearly the entire Golan Heights, but they never crossed the 1967 boundaries. And certainly, they never killed large numbers of civilians. They didn't capture and take hostage large numbers of civilians. And given their credit, the Syrians and Egyptians had thousands of battle tanks and war planes at their disposal. They had the Soviet Union fully behind them. These are what, in military terms, are lightly armed terrorists, no armor, no planes, and this penetration has been affected. And so I'm speaking now, not as a citizen, but as an historian. I'm just telling you, the impact, I think, is going to be in, could be several grades greater, deeper, the trauma even deeper in this way. And this will reverberate through several generations of Israelis, just as the Yom Kippur War reverberated. I talk in Hebrew about Dol Sinai, the generation of Sinai. That was a generation that was so deeply stricken by the surprise attack on October 6, 1973, following only six years after the Great Victory of 1967. And that impact had profound reverberations among that whole generation of Israelis. People like Yossi Bailin, who became the great negotiator with the Palestinians, he started off as a religious person who put on fill-in every day. And because of that war, he became secular. Other people, F.E.A. Tom, one of the leaders of the settlement movement, was secular before the Yom Kippur War, became religious after the Yom Kippur War. Two movements, Peace Now and Gusha Munim, Peace Now being the leftist movement, afraid that Israel wouldn't give up territory for peace, still around. Gusha Munim, the block of the faithful, a settlerly settlement religious movement, which was formed because they were feared that Israel would give up territory for peace. Those movements are still around. That's the generation of Sinai, referring to the biblical generation of Sinai that came out of Egypt as slaves and had to die out before they came into the land of Israel. Generation of Sinai. We're going to have a generation of Gaza now, and maybe more.

And we don't know how this is going to play out, but the impact will be long-term and it will be indelible. Let's talk about who is responsible for the attack of this day and for starting this war. If you read the headlines, they're going to talk about how Hamas, the terrorist group that controls Gaza, is responsible. But many are saying that this is too sophisticated of an attack to have just been Hamas, and also Iran backs Hamas. So explain, if you would, to people who don't pay that much attention to the relationship between Iran and Hamas, how that works, whether or not,

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according to some reports, they're actually farsi being spoken by some of the fighters on the ground in Gaza. Give us a sense of the relationship between Iran and Hamas and why this is not simply a podunk terrorist group carrying this out.

No, it's not. It's a deep and pervasive relationship between Hamas and Iran, Barry.

It's financial, but it's also strategic and tactical training. About 95 percent of the rockets that are fired at Israel from the Gaza Strip are actually made in Iran. And those that aren't made in Iran are engineered by Iran with Palestinian construction. So Iran is entirely engaged in Gaza and with Hamas. It has its own terrorist organization, Islamic Jihad, which is entirely, which is wholly owned and operated by Iran. But Hamas, and Hamas is not taking its orders from Iran the way, say, his Bullah would, but is, of course, is deeply influenced and prepared. I wouldn't be surprised if some of these terrorists were speaking Farsi. I would not be not be surprised. And as I mentioned earlier, Iran has interests, you know, on his interests. It's afraid of the Saudi-Israel deal. It's afraid of Saudi nuclearization.

It's looking at the polls, and it's afraid of Donald Trump, I must say. They're worried about his return. And they're looking for an opportunity to destabilize the Middle East. And a couple of weeks ago, we on Yom Kippur, we read the book of Jonah, which is one of the shortest books in the Bible, but one of the, I think, one of the most interesting and multifaceted books in the Bible. But it's really about a person who understands that prophecy is a no-win proposition, because if Jonah is a successful prophet, and he gets the people of Nineveh to repent, and then nothing happens, then they blame him for, you know, for false prophecy. But if he doesn't convince the people of Nineveh to repent, and they're all destroyed, then he's a failed prophet.

So there's only one thing worse than being a failed prophet, and that's being an accurate prophet. And I've been among a group of analysts in Israel who have said that war is coming, and war is coming because of some of the factors that I've mentioned, is connecting the dots. Iran was not going to sit passively, while the United States returned to the region, while Saudis acquired certain nuclear capabilities, not passively, while perhaps a different president came into the White House. There were many factors, and the Iranians perceived an opportunity. Israel was weakened divided, deeply weakened divided. Thousands of pilots saying they wouldn't show up for reserve duty. Think about this. And with the government that whose full legitimacy was highly circumspect, and it's a very pertinent point here, and I can't stress it enough, you know, in contrast to the United States, where the president is the commander in chief of the armed forces, the commander in chief of the Israeli defense forces, is not the prime minister, it's not the defense minister, it's not the chief of staff, it is the government. And when Israel goes to war, it has to go to government on the basis of consensus and legitimacy. And I don't have to tell you just how much that legitimacy was impaired by this government. So the Iranians perceived this. They perceived the situation in the United States, where they believed the United States was unwilling to get being vaged in another Middle Eastern war. You know, that the only truly confluence of opinion between Democrats and Republicans was on isolationism. And big questions being raised, even about American support to Ukraine. And they saw an opportunity. And I've been braced for this. I'm not alone. Many other people have been braced for it as well. The Iran deal is something that people hear a lot about. We hear a lot about it from the Biden administration. They recently gave Iran access to billions and billions of dollars. How does that connect to what has unfolded today?

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Well, I think there's a certain message given to the Iranians. And I don't know whether that message has been misinterpreted, but this is the message that they are internalizing, is that the United States will go to great lengths to avoid a conflict with Iran right now. And there have been innumerable provocations by Iran against American targets, including the possibility of Iranian agents assassinating former American officials on American soil. If there's no response to that, what conclusions do you draw? I mean, I had my own experience with this. I was the target of an Iranian assassination attempt about more than just over 10 years ago in downtown Washington, D.C., along with my Saudi colleague. And there was no American response. So the Iranians are internalizing a deep resistance on the part of the United States becoming engaged militarily again in the Middle East. And this is going to be the huge question facing this administration. In every round of fighting, Barry, and I'm not revealing anything classified here, the Israeli Defense Forces run short on ammunition. We do. We expand ammunition at a prodigious rate. Beneath the State of Israel are pre-positioned large stores of American war material, ammunition, even field hospitals. At almost every conflict, we have to ask the United States for the keys to these warehouses. We go in, we take out what we need, we write it down, we pay it back later. In only one case was permission denied, and that was during the Obama administration during the 2014 conflict with Gaza. The feeling in the United States that there were too many civilian casualties on the Palestinian side and we were denied helicopter ammunition. It's going to be a big question because if this keeps on evolving, if we go into a ground operation in Gaza, and I believe we are, if this begins to mushroom into something much bigger, we're going to need America's help. We're going to need what I call the diplomatic Iron Dome. The diplomatic Iron Dome is who's going to cast the veto in the Security Council, who's going to protect us, our soldiers against war crimes, accusations, and the Hague. And then there's going to be the mourning after, and no one else is going to be able to be involved in this to the extent that the United States is. Who's going to basically determine the status of Gaza? Who's going to help Israel rebuild? And not only Israel rebuild because there's going to be a lot of rebuilding to do. Israel has been making peace with Sunni Arab countries, of course, through the Abraham Accords. And now the White House has been on the brink of this historic deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia. How does what is unfolding in this first day of the war change that calculus? Well, I think that the peacemaking is going to have to be put on the table, which is precisely what the Iranians want. It would be very interesting if the United States would pursue this continually. It's going to be difficult because there's going to be a high level of casualties. And my hope would be, can I talk about hope? My hope would be now that many of the opposition parties will join the national unity government. We'll put our divisions aside for now, address them perhaps later. Certainly the judicial reform has to be put aside. Questions of who goes into the army and doesn't has to be put aside. Have a national unity government. That unity government, among other things, could maybe make the concessions that the Saudis in the United States need to move this agreement along. Maybe that's a silver lining looking forward, maybe. But it's difficult to think about that right now. And I think that our Arab allies, and I can say that Arab allies now, those governments

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are going to be under duress. I mean, already Al Jazeera is focusing on Palestinian casualties. Those reports are redounding into CNN and other media. I see them now. Al Jazeera reports. And that puts pressure. I've said for several years now that when we used to go to war, we used to worry about the impact of our military activities on the quote-unquote Arab Street. But the Arab Street, for the most part, is not in the Middle East anymore. The Arab Street is in Paris and in London. And when you're going to see protests break out, these protests probably will not be in Cairo. They won't be in Riyadh. They're going to be in London and Cairo. And that's going to put pressure on their governments.

There has been some unbelievable footage coming out of cities like London and Berlin of people celebrating on the streets of those cities.

Raise yourself. Our enemies, they are not in any way stupid. I don't think they can destroy the state of Israel by military means. I'm confident they can. I don't care if they fire all 150,000 rockets at us, not going to destroy us. But they can do the following. They can deny us the legitimate right to defend ourselves. And ultimately, they can deny us the legitimacy to exist. They do not have a military strategy. They have a military tactic that serves a media, diplomatic, and legal strategy. What does it mean? They attack us the way they do. They get us to kill a lot of their civilians, inadvertently. That gets picked up by the media and emphasized by the media. That immediately creates a diplomatic situation as pressure is put on governments to condemn Israel. And then that takes a legal reality where we are condemned in international courts and delegitimized. And that is their long-term strategy. And they've been pursuing it now for decades and slowly eroding and whittling away at our legitimacy, our ability to defend ourselves. Let me say one more thing. I don't know if I can go on, but that is, and I've written about this, it's been published in the Israeli and the English press, I've written about the overdraft in our strategic bank account. I'll explain this as quickly as possible.

Going back to our war of independence, we accepted the partition resolution of the UN in 1947. The Arabs rejected it and that gave us money in the bank, sort of strategic money in the bank. We could draw on that bank account to wage the war of independence. And say we did in 67, too, when Israel went the extra yard to try to prevent war, the Arabs came at us, that put money in our bank account. We drew that and they gave us the ability to defend ourselves. And you could take that image

up into the 21st century when, say, Camp David in 2000, when Israel offered a Palestinian state to the Palestinians and they turned it down with terror, our extremist was able to turn around and defeat terror, because he was able to draw on that bank, that diplomatic bank.

Even El Ud Olmert, by offering a Palestinian state to the Palestinians in 2008, it was rejected, was able to draw on that deposit in raging another campaign against Hamas and Gaza, etc.

We do not have that deposit in our bank account anymore. We do not. And we haven't proven that we're willing to make the extra mile for peace, or whatever peace was made, or even advancement toward peace. And so we're starting this war not with money in our account, forgive the extended metaphor here, but we're starting on an overdraft. And by the way, I've talked with Netanyahu about this extensively, about the overdraft, and I'm concerned about it, Per. I'm really concerned.

We'll be right back.

Prophecy and predictions are foolish to make in the midst of the chaos of war. But if we could talk a little bit about how you think Israel's response to Hamas will be different this time around,

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just to remind people, Israel has not been occupying the Gaza Strip since 2005. It pulled out of the Gaza Strip in 2005, nearly 20 years ago. And since then, every few years, Hamas terrorists, not every few years, sometimes every few weeks, Hamas terrorists launch rockets, Israel retaliates, sometimes it extends into a wider war. But I think most people would characterize Israel's response as generally being pretty restrained. There hasn't been some major ground invasion. How does that change now? It changes entirely. And I should put my cards on the table by saying I fought in Gaza as a soldier. I participated in that 2005 withdrawal was, for me, the most traumatic thing I ever went through in the war, in the army worse than any war, by the way. And for about a year and a half, when I was a deputy minister in the prime minister's office, I was put in charge of Gaza. I don't wish this on anybody and understand its internal dynamics. And you're right, we've now had upwards of five major outbreaks of conflict with Hamas. They have ended pretty much the same way. There have been limited incursions by the IDF, but no longer a takeover. Again, one of the big fears is what will we do on the day after what we do to the keys to Gaza? But also the fear of loss of life on our side, because you're talking about the lives of hundreds and hundreds of Israeli soldiers who would be lost in such a ground operation, going alley to alley, house to house. This is different. In 2021, there was diplomacy. President Biden, I think, rather remarkably, came out every single night for the first eight nights of that conflict and said, Israel has a right to defend itself. And he did this in the face of mounting pressure from the progressive wing of his party, which wanted Israel condemned. On the ninth day, a message came through from the White House that said, OK, you've had your chance. You've given them a bloody nose. Now's the time to stop. Within the Israeli government, there was great resistance to accepting a ceasefire, because 80% of the Israeli public didn't want the war in 2021 to end the same way all the other conflicts had ended. They wanted to see a change in the status quo. The events of the last 24 hours have dwarfed, and that's an understatement, dwarfed anything that Hamas has done to us in the past. The Israeli public is not going to be satisfied with the return to the status quo. There's just, I can't see any way that this is going to end in that way, which means, to put it in the most tragic and pedestrian terms, it means ground operation. I have, I don't know if I mentioned this earlier, I have two colleagues who were called up into the military already. They're in the infantry. Everybody knows they're receiving call-ups, which means that we are preparing for not just a ground invasion into Gaza, we're preparing for a multi-front conflict. How does Israel avoid a wider regional conflict, war, or is that inevitable as far as you're concerned? It's not always in our hands. Again, I'm going to take it from their perspective. If you're the head of a Hamas cell in Janine or Nablus, do you sit quietly while your sister organization and your fellow Palestinians are confronting a ground operation in Israel, in Gaza? All right, do you use to, if you are a radicalized Israeli Arab, do you sit quietly while this is happening? And most, I think most dangerously, if you are Hassan Isra'la and you are sitting in Beirut and people are saying, hey, these Hamas Sunni militants, these heroes are taking on the Israelis alone, and what are you just going to sit here sitting tea, sipping tea? Do you do nothing? What kind of legitimacy do you have as a jihadist? That's my perspective on it. And I think that I would give very, very high probability

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to the expansion of this war to other fronts. We talked a little bit, Michael, at the beginning of this conversation about the way the media has already covering this war. But this is one of those times where the gap between the official narrative, the cleaned up story on cable news and the spin that we're seeing in the New York Times and other places is just a world away from the raw footage and text messages and stories coming out from family and friends.

I go and I look at CNN or the BBC or MSNBC and I hear about ground assaults. I hear terrorists referred to as militants. One headline that the New York Times ran today was this, and I'm not just picking on the New York Times, it could be any of them. Gaza has suffered under a 16-year blockade, which is a little bit like the morning of 9-11 saying America has had a bad Middle East policy. It just has nothing to do with the level of carnage that we're seeing. I just want to point out one other example. Our friend Yasha Monk, a writer and journalist, pulled two headlines today from the Washington Post and put them side by side. Here's the one about Ukraine. Overwhelming grief

in Ukrainian village hit by strike, quote, there is no point in living. And on the right hand side, a headline about Israel, Netanyahu says, we're at war after major Hamas attack. In other words, as he put it, total moral clarity on the subject of Ukraine, but total moral relativism when it comes to the subject of Israel. At this point, I even hesitate to ask if you're surprised by this, but how do you understand it? How do you make sense of it?

Well, a lot of it, some of it has to do with the overdraft in our diplomatic bank account that I mentioned earlier. Much of it has to do with the fact that Israel is the Jewish state, and this is a conclusion I've reached over the course of nearly five decades involved in public diplomacy and defending Israel, that we all want to be judged by the same criteria that other states are judged, but we won't because we are the Jewish state and we forget that we're the Jewish state and we'll be judged. And so much of the coverage by the New York Times and others of Israel and its conflicts evokes classic antisemitic tropes from the Middle Ages.

It's the murder of the innocents. It's the blood libel. And I could give many, many examples.

I serve, actually, serve on an interministerial committee that examines public diplomacy. I'm the bad guy on this committee because people say we have to invest more here, more over there, and I say, okay, we can invest, but we have to be humble. We have to understand we cannot forget who we are. We are the Jewish state, and so we will be judged. From my mind, almost the major role of public diplomacy is to provide time and space for our soldiers to defend our country. And we may not be changing many hearts and minds, but we can definitely earn time and space. I want to say something about the blockade, because remember I told you I had that unfortunate experience of being in charge of Gaza during this period at the highest levels. Israel has what's known as a secondary military blockade against Gaza, which means that munitions and things that can be used as munitions, even a two by four block can be used to build a tunnel, cement can be used to build tunnels, are checked going into Gaza, what's called dual use items. But there's no blockade. There's no shortage of food. There's no shortage of medicines. There's no shortage of anything in Gaza because of this blockade, I assure you. What there is is a shortages that Hamas itself causes. We have a crossing, and at that crossing Israel can provide up to 1200 truckloads. These are big trucks of every type of medicine, equipment, food in the world. Hamas has restricted it usually to 400 trucks, because it likes to keep the population at the end of a civilian disaster, of a civil disaster. They like it. It keeps the population dependent on them.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / War in Israel: Michael Oren Explains How 'Evil' Infiltrated the Country

What I learned from being in charge of Gaza is that everything you know, everything you and I know, and you as a young mother knows about your relationship with your children, everything you know when it comes to Hamas, that comes to Gaza, throw it out the window.

This is a realization that uses and loses hundreds of children a year digging tunnels.

No one talks about it. It's child abuse on a massive scale. Massive scale.

It's not simply that Israelis are being terrorized by Hamas. It's that ordinary

Gazans condemned to live under Hamas are terrorized by Hamas.

If you saw that series put up by the times of Israel on testimonies by people living there,

but of course, but what's going on now in the south of Israel is not an assault on Israel.

It's assault on civilization. It's assault on humanity, as we understand humanity. These

terrorists occupy a different universe, but it's a dark and murderous universe,

but how have people so lost their minds and their moral compass that they can look

at the mutilated bodies of young women and the slaughter of elderly people in the streets piled up at a bus station? How can anyone look at that and justify it in any way? How?

They will. And again, the headline, Netanyahu declares war, not that 200 Israeli civilians were killed, not that these women were, I don't know, and we don't know whether they were assaulted,

abused, raped, left half naked in the bed. That dozens of Israeli young people have been either killed or taken hostage with that picture on Twitter of a terrorist holding the V sign over a very aged Israeli woman in a wheelchair. They will be forgotten, those images.

And what we may see is what we saw, say, in 2021 was the front page of the New York Times, the entire page, with just a picture of the Palestinian children, which Israel allegedly killed during that round of fighting. And you can't compare that with anybody. I mean, America killed thousands of children during its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Syria, no pictures. We were held to a completely, completely different standard.

And it's not only because of the absence of a peace process.

I'm looking at a video right now that I can only describe to you as a pogrom. It's on a highway in southern Israel in which people were dragged out of a minivan and out of their cars and left dead and mutilated on the side of the road in the street. I don't know how anyone can look at this image and find any way to talk to me about both sides. And yet I turn on CNN and they're entertaining a commentator for 20 minutes talking about the occupation.

And saying that Palestinians have a right to defend themselves. That's what Mr. Bargoudi said.

We have a right to self-defense too. I came on right after that, and CNN, if you heard it, and said, this is self-defense, murdering women and children, taking house. This is self-defense. Self-defense against what? Self-defense against what?

Here's what Prime Minister Netanyahu said as we've been on this recording. He said, we'll win this war, but the price will be unbearably heavy. Hamas wants to murder us all.

He said, murdering children and mothers in their homes, in their beds.

It is an enemy that kidnaps elderly people, children, and young girls.

He said, what happens today has never been seen before in Israel,

and I will ensure that it never happens again. The entire government supports this decision.

The IDF will immediately use all of its power to destroy Hamas' capabilities.

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We will fight to the bitter end and avenge this black day they plotted for Israel and its people. Then he told Gaza residents to get out now. I don't know how they'll be able to get out now, or where they will go. This is a Prime Minister who has deeply, deeply divided the Israeli public, and who many people I know in Israel are blaming for what happened on this black day, because he was so distracted by internal Israeli politics that this was allowed to occur. How much of the blame does Benjamin Netanyahu bear for what's gone on in the past 24 hours? I don't want to sound like a spokesman for anybody. I'm not. I just think now is not the time to start casting aspersions or blame, appointing blame. There's going to be blame enough to go around at the end of the day. There's going to be blame for political leaders. There's going to be blame for military leaders. There's going to be blame on our intelligence service. Always there's going to be blame. I participated in the investigative commission after the 2006 war in Lebanon, what we call the Second Lebanon War. I know that in Israel, and by the way, in contrast to many other societies, the buck does end with these people. After 2006, the Chief of Staff resigned. I don't know how many people actually resigned after Pearl Harbor or how many people actually resigned in the American government after 9-11, but in Israel, there are prices to be paid. Again, without pointing fingers and not indulging in prophecies, I wouldn't imagine that this government survives this, but that's not the issue right now. It's not whether the government survives, it's whether we survive. We will deal with that later. Michael, how is this going to affect the future of Middle East diplomacy? A lot of people I know have long since given up on the idea of a two-state solution. Where does this put that discussion? Well, there's been a lot of talk I've heard already in the media, in the American media, that this has happened because of the absence of a process toward a two-state solution. And it's important to note that Hamas never wanted a two-state solution. Hamas is determined to destroy the two-state solution. And the only reason that the Palestinians who support the two-state solution are alive is because Israel keeps them alive, and Judea and Samaria and the West Bank. So it's completely irrelevant, the absence, say, of a peace process. Tomorrow is a Palestinian state. That state would have a leader who is unelected. Mahmoud Abbas is in the 18th year of his four-year term. He won't run for election because Hamas will take over the West Bank. And Mary, these really aren't stupid. We'd love to have peace with the Palestinians. We'd love to see some progress. But we know if there was ever a Palestinian state now, in what you call the West Bank and parts of Jerusalem, you know, I live in South Tel Aviv, I see those areas from my back window. We wouldn't be in rocket range. We'd be in rightful range. And what you're seeing now going on the Gaza border would go along the entire state of Israel, be totally existential. No Israeli, no Israeli in his right mind would agree to that. And what this will do, this will reinforce Israeli public opinion against making progress on that piece, because every time we make that progress in peace, we get war on rockets. We withdrew from Lebanon 2000 and got thousands of rockets. We drew from Gaza 2005, got thousands of rockets. We signed the Oslo Cords 30 years ago and got bus bombings and restaurant bombings. Young Israelis in particular, not stupid. And they will be extremely reluctant now, even more so, to even think about ways of reconciling with the Palestinians. Michael, we've been having this conversation. You're in New Jersey with your mother when he's flying back to Israel. I was able to get on a flight in a couple of hours.

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And I hope that flight can get through, because I cannot bear being here with my children or in bomb shelters. I can't. Michael, Israel is a very, very small country, physically, smaller than New Jersey, the state where you're sitting in right now, about to leave to fly back to Tel Aviv, and just population-wise, less than 10 million people. Do you say everyone in Israel knows somebody? Do you know anyone that is missing or that has, worse, died after the events of today, the first day of this war? I've heard from my family about people they know who have died and people they know are missing. They haven't died. They were murdered, Barry. All of this, like Samuel Huntington, clash of civilizations, all of that is looked at now. It's like so passe. Everyone's given way to this kind of isolationism, moral relativism. And today was a day to remember that there is a difference between good and evil and between barbarism and civilization. And no amount of wishing away evil will actually make it go away. This actually isn't the clash of civilizations. Because the clash of civilizations suggests symmetry. It suggests moral equivalency, but it isn't. It is a civilization that is being assaulted and massacred by barbarism, which is very different than a clash of civilizations. We don't have a difference of views with Hamas. We don't have a political disagreement with Hamas. We don't even have even sort of separate moral codes than Hamas. What we do is inhabit, as I said earlier, different universes. And their universe is a universe in which children can be massacred, old people can be taken hostage and humiliated and beaten, in which hundreds of Palestinian children can be used to dig tunnels and die digging those tunnels. That is that universe. There is no clash of civilizations here. There's a civilization which is fighting it for its survival against evil. Michael, we're going to be thinking about you and your family. We wish you a safe flight back to Israel and be in touch. Thanks, Bear. Thanks for listening. We'll see you again soon. you