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# THE SUMMER OF STRATEGIC DECISION

From Kyiv to Hormuz  
The New Tests of American Leadership



## America at 250: The Responsibility to Lead

by Ahmed Charai

As the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its independence, this historic moment offers an occasion for pride, gratitude, and reflection—not only for Americans, but for all those across the world who have been inspired by the American experiment and who continue to believe in the promise of freedom, opportunity, and human progress.

For two and a half centuries, the United States has demonstrated a remarkable ability not simply to endure, but to grow stronger, renew its purpose, and expand the possibilities of what a nation and its citizens can achieve.

America was founded as more than a territory or a government. It was founded as an idea: that free citizens, sustained by resilient institutions and protected by law, could shape their own future.

That idea has survived wars, economic crises, moments of division, and profound transformations in the international system. Through every generation, the United States has adapted to new challenges while preserving the principles that have given it strength and meaning.

America's achievement has never rested on perfection. It has rested on resilience, initiative, creativity, innovation, and an enduring confidence in the future.

In 1862, during one of the most consequential moments in American history, Abraham Lincoln reminded Congress of the responsibility carried by the United States:

**“We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.”**

Lincoln's words were not an expression of national vanity. They reflected a profound understanding of what the American experiment represented. He recognized that the United States mattered not only because of its power,


  
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but because of the hope it offered—to its own citizens and to generations far beyond its borders.

**That hope remains alive today.**

America's leadership rests on a unique combination of strengths: the vitality of its institutions, the initiative of its citizens, the scale of its economy, the excellence of its armed forces, the depth of its alliances, and its extraordinary capacity for creation and innovation.

From aviation and space exploration to medicine, communications, digital technology, and artificial intelligence, American creators have repeatedly transformed the world. The visionary spirit of its scientists, entrepreneurs, engineers, universities, and companies continues to expand the boundaries of what humanity believes possible.

This extraordinary record gives the United States every reason to celebrate its 250th anniversary with confidence and pride.

**But for a great nation, pride also carries responsibility.**

The responsibility of the United States is not to impose its will upon the world or to attempt to resolve every dispute alone. It is to remain confident in the values, capabilities, and leadership that have allowed it to guide coalitions, support allies, deter aggression, encourage innovation, and create opportunities for peace and prosperity.

For decades, the United States has built alliances with nations that share these aspirations. These partnerships are not burdens inherited from another era. They are among America's greatest strategic achievements.

They have helped protect peace, strengthen deterrence, expand economic cooperation, and create a network of nations committed to a more stable and prosperous international order. They have also enabled the United States to multiply

its influence by leading with others rather than acting alone.

Allies must continue to strengthen their capabilities and assume their responsibilities. But the value of an alliance cannot be measured only through immediate costs. Its greater value lies in the confidence it creates, the dangers it deters, and the crises it can help prevent.

American leadership is strongest when it inspires confidence, encourages responsibility, and brings nations together around common objectives.

That leadership remains essential because the United States is repeatedly called upon to help confront crises far beyond its borders—from Iran and Yemen to Libya, and other nations affected by conflict and instability.

America cannot determine every outcome, nor should it be expected to bear every burden. Yet the world continues to look to Washington for leadership: to convene allies, open diplomatic possibilities, deter aggression, protect international commerce, support stability, and help prevent local conflicts from becoming wider catastrophes.

Each American decision therefore carries meaning beyond the immediate crisis. American action—or inaction—shapes the confidence of allies, the calculations of adversaries, the credibility of deterrence, and the prospects for diplomacy.

It can influence whether a conflict remains contained or spreads across borders, whether a political vacuum is filled by responsible institutions or exploited by hostile powers, and whether future crises become less dangerous or more difficult to resolve.

Leadership must therefore consider not only what American decisions represent for countries in conflict today, but also what precedents they establish for the international order tomorrow—and what they ultimately mean for the security, prosperity, influence, and credibility of the United States itself.

This responsibility is especially important at a moment of profound strategic transformation. From Kyiv to Hormuz, from Gaza to Ankara, the

question is no longer simply whether the old international order is under pressure. It is who will help construct the next one—and according to which principles.

Europe is being called upon to develop greater strategic capacity while preserving the transatlantic partnership that has supported peace and prosperity for generations.

Israel is confronting immediate security challenges while also considering the strategic foundations of its long-term regional future.

Across the Middle East, nations face a choice between continued confrontation and a new era of integration, technological advancement, economic opportunity, and shared prosperity.

In each of these arenas, American engagement remains indispensable—not because Washington should dictate every outcome, but because no other nation possesses the same combination of diplomatic reach, economic influence, military capability, technological leadership, global alliances, and power to convene.

American leadership must also remain firm in confronting authoritarian regimes that seek to replace cooperation with coercion and freedom with repression.

Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and other authoritarian systems differ greatly in their power, geography, and strategic importance. Yet each offers a political model fundamentally different from the American example—one based on restricted choice, centralized control, and fear of individual freedom.

The United States should continue to confront these challenges with clarity, strength, discipline, and confidence in its own model.

Leadership does not require intervention in every crisis. Nor does restraint require withdrawal, indifference, or the abandonment of allies. Between overreach and retreat lies the path that has defined America at its best: principled diplomacy, credible deterrence, economic strength, technological leadership, and the patient construction of lasting coalitions.

**This is the strategic architecture required for the next era.**

At 250, the United States is not simply commemorating what it has accomplished. It is demonstrating that the principles, ambitions, and creative energy that shaped its first two and a half centuries remain capable of guiding the future.

America's leadership has endured because it has never been static. It has continually evolved, adapted, and found new ways to transform power into possibility and moments of uncertainty into opportunities for renewal.

In this summer of strategic decision, the world once again looks to the United States—not for perfection, and not for answers to every problem, but for confidence, vision, and the capacity to bring others together.

**The American dream must not simply be remembered. It must continue to inspire, to create, and to lead. \***

**AHMED CHARAI**

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# ISRAEL'S AMERICAN DILEMMA: HOW TO WIN BACK DEMOCRATS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Reuters/Eduardo Munoz



by Dov S. Zakheim

**B**y fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States in two major military operations, Israel is benefiting from the closest relationship it has ever had with Washington. Yet in an ironic twist of political fate, at the very same time both political and more ominously, public support for the Jewish state is the lowest in decades.

The wars in both Gaza and Lebanon have been the subject of hysterical anti-Israeli reports, many of which have subsequently proved inaccurate. As a result, the media, especially social media, has provided a new and powerful platform for the anti-Israeli, and anti-Semitic Democratic Left and Republican far-Right. Both cast Israel as a purveyor of “Genocide” and often question Israel’s very existence.

On the Right, influencers like Tucker Carlson and politicians like Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY) have argued that support for Israel is not in America’s interests. On the Left, numerous academics and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have branded as a “Zionist” any Jew that supports the notion of a Jewish State, and called for that person’s exclusion from all public discourse and activities.

Moreover, Democrats have nominated an increasing number of openly anti-Israel candidates, some of whom are Jewish and many of whom are members of DSA or identify with its platform. And leading Democrats have met with Hasan Piker, whose anti-Israel and anti-Semitic districts are followed by million.

It is perhaps no surprise therefore that in an increasingly hostile American environment, the Anti-Defamation League reported that despite

a decline in total anti-Semitic incidents in 2025, they were still five times more frequent than a decade ago.

Unceasing polemical attacks by those on both the Right and the Left clearly are influencing public perceptions of Israel. A Pew poll taken in March found that 60% of U.S. adults have an unfavorable or somewhat unfavorable view of Israel and only 37% view Israel favorably. Four years ago, those numbers came close to being the reverse: 55 per cent of Americans viewed Israel favorably, 42 % viewed the country unfavorably. Moreover, for the first time ever, a February Gallup Poll found that Americans are more sympathetic to Palestinians (46%) than to Israel (33%).

An even more recent Pew poll in June found that 83% of those identifying themselves as politically Left hold unfavorable views of Israel, while 67% of centrists do the same as do 37% of those politically Right.

Even more troubling is the fact that poll results are not confined to any one group. The March Pew poll found that 57% per cent of Republicans aged 18-49 view Israel somewhat or very unfavorably. An even higher percentage of Democrats in the same age group, 84%, have a negative view of the Jewish state.

Israel commands little support in several important religious communities. These include only 39% of White non-evangelical Protestants, 35% of Catholics and a 33% of Black Protestants.

Perhaps not surprisingly, only 4% of Muslim American view Israel positively. But Muslims are among the fastest growing American faith communities. Their political power and influence is certain to grow over time.

Israel still commands significant support from the Jewish and Evangelical communities—respectively 64 and 65 per cent—but the fact that roughly a third of each community does not view Israel favorably is a troubling sign.

Israel commands the strongest support among Modern Orthodox Jews, many of whom have family living on the West Bank and/or serve in the Army. Haredi Jews generally also support Israel, with the notable exception of Satmar and its related communities that are openly anti-Israel. In any event, the Orthodox constitute only about 15 per cent of all American Jews, and the largest and most liberal Jewish stream, the Reform Movement, is far more critical of Israel. Indeed, the thirty per cent of New York Jews who voted for Zohar Mamdani, a longtime BDS supporter who refuses to concede Israel’s right to exist, reflects the split that is roiling the American Jewish community.

Part of the American public’s seeming disillusion with Israel certainly stems from the Gaza war. Part is a result of disgust with the statements and actions of the far-right ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir. But part is a direct result of its highly negative view of Benjamin Netanyahu.

When President Doland Trump angrily told Netanyahu in a June phone call that “everyone hates you,” he was exaggerating, but nevertheless was reflecting a view held by a majority of the American public. The March Pew poll reported that nearly 60% of respondents “have little or no confidence in Netanyahu to do the right thing regarding world affairs” up from 52% last year. That figure is almost identical with the Pew findings regarding public approval of Israel and points to a positive correlation between the two sets of polling results.

Negative views of Netanyahu are highest among young Americans. The June Pew poll indicated that roughly two-thirds of those aged 18-49 have little confidence that he would “do the right thing regarding world affairs.” In fact, that view is shared by 54% of those aged fifty and above.

Public opinion and growing pressure from the party’s left-wing has led many Democratic politicians to question aid to Israel. In April a record 40 Democratic senators voted to cut off some American arms to Israel. Congressional hopefuls have been increasingly distancing themselves from pro-Israel policies and especially from AIPAC.

Some presidential candidates have gone even further. Most notably, Maryland Senator Chris

van Hollen, who is also a potential candidate for Secretary of State if Democrats take the White House in 2028, penned an op-ed in the New York Times that echoed long-standing Palestinian demands for the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, the last of which Israel officially designated as part of its united capital forty-six years ago.

Recognizing the danger to Israel if it loses American support, especially if the Democrats take the House of Representatives in the upcoming November elections, and if a Democrat is elected president in 2028, Netanyahu has announced that upon the 2028 expiry of the current American-Israel Memorandum of Understanding, Jerusalem no longer will request any financial assurance from Washington.

That approach may quell some of the criticism of Israel, but in politics 2028 is an eon away; until then Israel will continue to be the subject of vitriolic criticism on the extreme Right and the Left both in Washington and in the public at large.

Ending American financial assistance to Israel also will not bring an end to public dislike of Netanyahu, who has been the face of Israel for so long that many Americans under the age of thirty hardly recall any other Israeli prime minister. Should Netanyahu form a new right-wing government after the upcoming Israeli elections, he may find that terminating American aid may not change American public opinion. And he may yet come to regret his decision to plump so openly for one of America’s two great political parties while essentially writing off the other. \*

#### DOV S. ZAKHEIM

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# RED SKY AT NIGHT, SAILORS DELIGHT; RED SKY AT MORN, SAILOR TAKE WARN!



Reuters/Yoruk Isik/File Photo



by James Foggo

There is an old sailors' proverb which holds that a red sky at night is a sign of fair weather to follow, whereas a red sky at morn brings storm clouds and rough weather. If this proverb applies to geopolitics, the modern state of maritime security resembles a crimson sky with storm clouds on the horizon, as new threats to freedom of navigation and the global economy emerge daily. It is therefore imperative that America and its allies not only maintain strong alliances but also strong navies that can take swift action to mitigate threats posed to freedom of navigation and the global economy.

The mission of the United States Navy for the last 250 years has been to keep the sea lines of communication open and promote the free flow of maritime commerce upon which the global economy depends. For over a century, the United States Navy has been the largest and most technologically advanced Navy in the world and has largely operated with impunity in any body of water since the end of World War II. However, the adoption of asymmetric maritime warfare by America's adversaries has put this

at risk. To prevail against such threats, western navies must adapt quickly by bolstering the size and strength of their navies and embracing non-traditional methods of warfare in critical theaters such as the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf.

In my two years as the Commander of the U.S. SIXTH Fleet and Striking and Support Forces NATO in the Mediterranean, I commanded the annual Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) exercise in 2015 and 2016, mustering 50 ships and 5,000 sailors to dominate the Baltic theater in the wake of Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine in 2014. The Russians responded by sending their auxiliary general intelligence (AGI) ships and Steregushchiy-class corvettes to monitor us and their aircraft to harass us, but there wasn't much they could do to deter us. In recent years, however, the Russians have resorted to asymmetric warfare techniques in the Baltic Sea, employing their shadow fleet to disrupt one of the most important sea lines of communication: critical undersea infrastructure (CUI). Since then, several undersea pipelines and communication cables have been cut or disrupted, with ships dragging their anchor for 100 nautical miles and then feigning ignorance. The significant economic harm these actions caused to Baltic nations prompted NATO to

establish Operation Baltic Sentry (December 2024), a naval operation which deployed dozens of ships to protect Baltic CUI and significantly mitigated its disruption, furthering obviating the need for powerful navies.

Similarly, during my tenure as Commander of the U.S. SIXTH Fleet and Naval Forces Europe, I supported a significant naval presence in the Black Sea Region. Typically, US warships operated for about 125 days in the Black Sea, augmented by another 125 days of NATO presence, resulting in either a U.S. warship or a NATO warship patrolling Black Sea waters for two-thirds of any year. The Russians may not have liked this, but they gradually became acclimated to a western maritime presence and periodic naval exercises. All this changed with Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine in February 2022. SIXTH Fleet had three warships in the Black Sea in December 2021—the Command Ship USS Mount Whitney and two DDGs: USS Arleigh Burke and USS Porter. They were withdrawn from the Black Sea without replacements so as not to antagonize Vladimir Putin, who ironically attacked Ukraine anyway. Unfortunately, no American warships have patrolled the Black Sea since.

Ukraine's navy and port infrastructure suffered repeated Russian strikes, and Ukraine was forced to scuttle its flagship Hetman Sahaidachny in March 2022 to prevent her from falling into Russian hands. Without any ships, Ukraine turned to asymmetric warfare, using airborne, surface, or sub-surface drones to destroyed over a third of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, including its flagship Moskva. Ukraine's ability to execute asymmetric warfare against the Russian Federation at scale has contributed to a global rethinking of maritime strategy and naval force design.

The U.S. Navy confronted its own asymmetric challenge head-on when Houthi militia groups, as part of a broader Iranian proxy network, began attacking Israel and targeting hundreds of ships in the Red Sea. The Navy responded with a near continuous presence in the Red Sea and

the establishment of a U.S. brokered coalition, named Prosperity Guardian. While some allies and partners showed interest in keeping the Red Sea corridor and access to the Suez Canal open, the preponderance of the risk was taken by the U.S. Navy.

The presence of American warships to deter and defend against Houthi strikes had several consequences. Houthi strikes have increased awareness of the cost-imposing strategy of asymmetric warfare, as American warships have expended missiles worth millions of dollars to shoot down a Houthi drone worth about \$20,000. Defending against attacks in the Red Sea has depleted U.S. Navy missile magazines aboard warships and in global storage, driving increased interest and investment in lower-cost alternatives to a two-million-dollar missile. This underscores the urgent need to field electronic warfare and directed energy weapons as drone warfare becomes more prolific. Finally, the evolving nature of naval warfare has created a sense of urgency to modify tactics or update sensor data in real time. The U.S. Navy perfected this exquisite level of analysis after each interaction in the Red Sea, giving it unparalleled experience countering this type of warfare.

This brings me to my final example of lessons learned from the outbreak of hostilities between the United States and Iran in the Arabian Gulf. In response to forty-seven years spent undermining the U.S. and her allies, President Trump's Operation Epic Fury authorized strikes on Iranian military targets, nuclear facilities, and political leadership to decapitate the regime, destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program, and severely weaken its military forces, specifically, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Force. With three aircraft carrier strike groups operating near the Arabian Gulf, the preponderance of force in Epic Fury came from these afloat offshore assets, which further reduced America's missile stockpiles. The USS FORD, set a record not surpassed since WWII for a continuous 330 days (11 months) deployed at sea during multiple combat operations,

including Operation Absolute Resolve in Venezuela. Clearly, more carrier strike groups are needed to keep deployments down to a notional seven months at sea and reduce the wear and tear on any one ship or on the Sailors embarked.

Many of the objectives of Operation Epic Fury were accomplished but with notable caveats. Iranian regime leadership has proven to be more resilient than expected and the IRGC has demonstrated the ability to maintain continuity of operations in a decentralized manner. Furthermore, the Iranian nuclear program has been set back but not irreparably destroyed. The Iranian Navy was destroyed, but the IRGC still operates hundreds of fast attack craft that can harass, interdict, or damage shipping near the Strait of Hormuz. Iran demonstrated its capability to mine the Strait of Hormuz, effectively shutting down or significantly reducing commercial traffic in the Strait amid rising fuel prices.

Operation Epic Fury illustrates why a larger, more powerful Navy is needed. It is no surprise that the Department of War asked Congress to approve a \$1.5 trillion defense budget for the first time in history. America will continue to face the asymmetric warfare challenges encountered during Operation Epic Fury will likely be repeated, perhaps in a conflict with China in the Western Pacific.

To prepare for such a conflict, America needs more ships, period. Specifically, we must continue to build nuclear-powered aircraft carriers built on “five-year centers”, i.e. one carrier produced every five years, which will guarantee a fleet of at least 10 carriers over a fifty-year lifespan. Alongside the aircraft carriers, we need a robust and modern fleet of destroyers, frigates, and replenishment ships. In the undersea domain, we currently field the quietest and most lethal platform in the world—the Virginia-class (VACL) submarine. Likewise, the continuity and credibility of our nuclear deterrent depends on the most secure part of the Triad—the Colombia-class ballistic missile

submarine. The Navy’s requirement is to build one Colombia and two VACL submarines a year, and we cannot afford to fall any further behind on submarine production. We must also ramp up production of weapons to fill our depleted magazines with more conventional weapons, hypersonic missiles, and directed energy weapons as soon as possible. Finally, America’s counter mine warfare capability is insufficient, and while I laud the Navy’s desire to deploy unmanned systems to conduct traditional mine detection and mine sweeping operations, we must have more of it and with a stand-alone capability in all the theaters that we operate.

These are just a few of the things necessary to optimize a modern fleet. The Chinese Navy currently possesses more warships than America, and there is a certain quality in quantity. However it is never too late to invest in the U.S. maritime industrial base and reverse the decline in warship inventory in the USA to ensure America is prepared for its next conflict at sea and ready to sail into a red sky and the storms that are sure to follow. \*

#### — JAMES G. FOGGO

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Credit: © Oren Nahshon/ZUMA Wire/ZUMAPRESS.com

# ISRAEL’S GRAND STRATEGY – AND POLITICS? – AT AN INFLECTION POINT



by Eran Lerman

Grand Strategy has been elegantly defined by John Louis Gaddis and others as the dynamic relationship between national goals – which can aim high – and the constraint of resources, which are always finite. For the leaders of Israel in its younger years, essentially seeking the stability necessary for resurrecting an ancient but dispersed nation, this has come to be represented by a short, sharp (and for some in the West, almost unpronounceable) triad: *Harta'ah*, *Hatra'ah*, *Hachra'ah* – Deterrence, Early Warning, and a Decisive Outcome. The first meant that Israel's enemies should think twice before they challenge it on the battlefield; the second meant that any plan to do so anyway should be detected well ahead so that a reserve-based military could be put on alert; and the third – that such an army must win a victory quickly and overwhelmingly so as to be able to release the reserves back to their place in the fast-growing economy.

The goals were straightforward – sheer survival, in what was assumed to be an inherently hostile environment. However,

the tools were more complex and nuanced. Deterrence is essentially a psychological construct in the mind of an adversary. Early Warning, while resting upon Israel's impressive intelligence collection, ultimately relies on the interpretation of an adversary's intentions, and hence on highly subjective factors; and a «victory» can easily emerge as the most elusive of the three, when faced with an adversary whose notions of what constitutes «victory» are very different than ours. Thus, 59 years ago, Israel's crowning military achievement – the dramatic result of the Six Day War – was actually the consequence first of a failure to deter the Fatah terrorists and their Syrian backers, and then the failure to predict Gamal Abd al-Nasser's adventurist foray into Sinai. Moreover, despite the utter defeat of three Arab armies, the «decisive outcome» (*Hachra'ah*) did not prevent Nasser from resuming warfare along the Suez Canal not long afterwards. The War of Attrition was then followed in 1973 by an Egyptian and Syrian offensive, once again casting doubts about all three pillars of the national defense.

Thus, in recent decades, several more grand strategy pillars were added to the edifice – supplementing, not replacing, the first three. Israel came to rely, in varying degrees, upon an informal but firm alliance with a superpower

– the United States – with their cooperation culminating in the Epic Fury/ Roaring Lion combined arms operations in 2026. For this to be possible, Israel also took to the regional diplomatic field, signing peace treaties with Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994, and the Abraham Accords partners (UAE, Bahrain, Morocco) in 2020. If in the 1950s it was the periphery of the region that Israel sought to befriend – the Shah's Iran, Kemalist Turkey, the Ethiopian monarchy – the strategic pillar of alliance and alignment is now firmly based on key relationships at the heart of the region.

Another pillar, long neglected but now vital (not least, because of the bitter lessons of 7 October 2023) is Hagana, defensive measures: most significantly, since 2012, the use of the layers of missile defense (Iron Dome, David's Sling, Arrow) to foil attacks. Israel had taken measures to block penetration through tunnels: and yet it turned out to be frighteningly easy for the marauders to breach the Gaza border defenses. It is therefore necessary at this stage for the IDF to build up stronger defensive positions on all active borders, both within the Gaza Strip and in the North, to neutralize such threats.

As October 7 proved, technological superiority is not the answer to all challenges: but it does constitute at this point in history a pillar of primary importance for Israel's future. It is based on a remarkable synergy between national security interests and the stronger points of a surging national economy, driven by high technology and rising to the first rank of international leaders in a number of key fields. Contrary to the predictions of scholars, the defense effort did not sink the Israeli economy – it lifted it.

A final, seventh pillar, established in 1981 by then Prime Minister Menachem Begin when Israel struck Saddam Hussein's nuclear project (and thus referred to as the Begin Doctrine), is the determination to prevent Israel's committed enemies from ever having a military nuclear capability. This was implemented against Bashar

Assad's Syria in 2007, and is now at the center of the ongoing campaign against Iran, including the Rising Lion Operation in June 2025 (joined by the US Midnight Hammer at its last stage) and then in the war launched by both Israel and America on 28 February 2026.

There are clearly elements of continuity for Israel's decision makers now looking into the future. Deterrence is still the ultimate goal. Early warning, or more broadly, intelligence dominance, remains an existential requirement. Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran were dealt heavy blows, although the notion of «absolute victory» remains as elusive as ever. Defences have been improved. At the level of military cooperation – as well as the civilian-military coordination on the humanitarian conditions in Gaza – the IDF is working more closely than ever with its American counterparts. Advanced technology still gives Israel not only a strategic edge, but also a massive position in the fast-growing global market for military procurement.

And yet when all components of Israel's complex new realities, largely generated by the three years of war and by the world's responses to them, are put together, it is clear that the nation is in dire need of re-tooling its grand strategy. The next government – since Israel faces a decisive parliamentary election this fall – would need to break old patterns, adjusting its goals to its emerging resources, and its tools of implementation to the new challenges.

Above all, Israel now shoulders a transformative role in regional affairs. It is not a «hegemonic power», as some Israelis fancy themselves to be, and some regional enemies allege it seeks to be – but it is certainly a strong catalyst for change and a firm friend to those who stand with it. To carry this forward, further weakening the Iranian regime (and fatally wounding it, at some point down the road?), and at the same time deterring other would-be Islamist forces, Israel must shed off the assumptions about a stabilized region, and focus on sustaining a powerful profile for years to come.

This, in turn, involves three interconnected changes in foundational policies:

1. At the level of external relations, the time has come (as Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has openly stated several times in recent months), Israel – with a GDP per capita higher than Japan or even Germany and a remarkably robust inflow of dollars, driving the Shekel up – to shed off gradually the dependence on the US taxpayer and the annual Foreign military Financing. This would also alleviate the complexities generated by the rise on the far edges of both left and right in US politics of a virulent anti-Israeli chorus.

2. In terms of regional policy – which by necessity includes attitudes towards the unresolved Palestinian question – Israel may need to alter its present course, which if carried through may well reduce or even preclude a future solution: and as it prepares to end Hamas rule in Gaza, by force if necessary, it needs to attend to the need for legitimate and workable alternatives.

3. All this requires a much broader national consensus, as well as a new disposition in terms of burden sharing. Ben-Gurion built a military based on rapid mobilization of the reserves – but also on equally rapid de-mobilization once «hachra'ah», decisive outcome, has been achieved. Since 2023, however, reservists have been serving for prolonged periods, some killed, many wounded, and the country is swept by anger over the refusal of one specific (large and growing) segment of society – the «Haredi», ultra-Orthodox – to even contemplate military service.

Thus, whatever the specific outcome of the fall elections (one is reminded of both Niels Bohr's adage – «prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future» – and Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Britain's assessment that «A week is a long time in politics»), the present political and strategic set-up in Israel would need to change. Recent disagreements with President Trump over Lebanon, retaliation, and a possible deal with the IRGC regime in Iran point to the need to accelerate the process

of reducing dependence upon the US (but still seeking to enhance coordination with it). On the Palestinian front, a strategically oriented coalition government may feel obliged to modify some of the present team's practices. And internally, it seems increasingly impossible to keep in the same harness political parties which represent those who serve and sacrifice (the modern Orthodox sector more than most) alongside those who represent the sector that refuses to do so. \*



Arrow 3 missile defense system, the missile is a development of Israel and the USA. A dummy is shown at the Berlin Security Conference. IMAGO/Mike Schmidt

**ERAN LERMAN**

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From left to right: President Ursula von der Leyen, Prime Minister Keir Starmer, President Alexander Stubb, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President Donald Trump, President Emmanuel Macron, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany, Mark Rutte. Credit: Aaron Schwartz/POOL via CNP/INSTARimages.com



# AMERICAN LEADERSHIP ROLE IN EUROPE IS NOT AN OPTION



by Jacob Heilbrunn

In early July a major NATO conference will take place in Ankara, Turkey. It arrives right after America's 250th anniversary celebrations and at a moment of rising tensions between America and Europe over a welter of geopolitical issues, including trade, immigration, the Middle East, Ukraine and Russia. Will President Donald Trump seize the moment to improve relations—or will he issue what amounts to a second declaration of independence from the Old World?

Over the past several weeks, leading Trump administration officials have regularly registered their hostility towards developments in Europe. Vice-president JD Vance intervened into domestic British politics, seizing upon the murder of the British student Henry Nowak by a Sikh man named Vickrum Digwa to accuse the authorities of failing to stymie immigration. “Henry Nowak died the same way a civilization dies,” Vance wrote on X. “He should still be alive today, and he would be if the last few generations of European elites had stood their ground against the politics of self-hatred and the mass invasion of migrants, many of whom despise the West and the people who love it.”

His statement was echoed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth who complained in a speech at the June 6 D-Day ceremony in France that Europe has remained passive in the face of a foreign threat. Hegseth observed that “freedom is not free” but that some European countries had become complacent about defending it. He went on to state that “Today, different European

beaches are stormed by different dangerous ideologies,” he said. “Boats and men arrive. When will European capitals do something about that invasion? Or is it too late?”

The truth is that the 27-member European Union and Great Britain have instituted a crackdown on immigration that critics are likening to Trump administration policies. The EU has recently approved sweeping new regulations that create detention centers abroad—mainly in Africa—and that allow law enforcement officers to enter public institutions such as hospitals without a warrant from a judge. Already illegal border crossings in Europe are down 40 percent. Immigration to Great Britain has almost fallen in half.

But the Trump administration is tapping into anxieties about immigration and multiculturalism that remain acute in Europe. In Germany, for example, the Alternative Party for Germany continues to hammer away at cultural issues. One of its politicians, Björn Höcke, has caused a furor by alleging that West Germans are inauthentic Germans because, unlike East Germans, they were seduced by American culture after World War II. They are, he asserted, “German-speaking Americans” in contrast to the “German-speaking Germans” in the East. In France, Jordan Bardella, the president of the National Rally party, is polling strongly to replace Emmanuel Macron as president. And in Hungary, the new Prime Minister Peter Magyar has vowed to pursue a strict course on immigration.

Immigration will continue to provide a potent rhetorical issue for the Trump administration to throw brickbats at Europe, but it is in the sphere of defense and trade policy

that the real action will take place. Despite a lavish visit to Great Britain this past September where he was feted by King Charles, Trump has not been slow to express his vexation with Prime Minister Keir Starmer for refusing to back his foray into Iran, deeming him “no Winston Churchill.” Since then, Starmer has allowed the United States to employ British military bases for “defensive purposes.”

It is Ukraine that poses the most acute challenge for Europe. The Trump administration has repeatedly tried and failed to establish an armistice between Ukraine and Russia. That failure can in large measure be ascribed to its hostility toward Ukraine and eagerness to placate Russian president Vladimir Putin who remains intent on conquering the Donbass. Europe has become the main supporter of Ukraine, including a 90-billion-euro loan package for 2026-2027. It has proven a winning bet. Against all the odds, Kyiv has battled Moscow to a standstill. In divesting itself of support for Ukraine, the Trump administration has vitiated its own ability to direct events in the region.

The Trump administration's war against Iran has also prompted Europe and the Gulf states to improve their partnerships. The Netherlands, France, Italy and the United Kingdom have all sent military assets to help protect the Gulf states from Iranian attacks. The UK and France are floating the idea of a maritime coalition for the Strait of Hormuz that ensures freedom of passage.

Other changes are occurring. Germany has embarked upon a massive rearmament campaign, the most far-reaching since World War II, when the country ended up being sundered in half. The Economist predicts that Germany could in a few years become the “benchmark military power in Europe,” somewhat to the unease of France. Its annual military budget will reach 150 billion euros in 2029. In this regard, Germany is living up to the stipulation of the 2025 Hague Summit, which set a 5 percent outlay of GDP on defense spending for NATO members.

Whether the Trump administration has fully pondered the implications of a more independent and powerful Germany is an open question. The issue is not that Germany would go rogue, but that it would be less inclined to cooperate with America, whether in the Middle East or in Asia. But the Trump administration has not sought to bolster its ties with Berlin. Instead, the Pentagon, at the behest of Hegseth, has instituted a drawdown of 5,000 troops from Germany, which will leave it hosting about 30,000 American service members. Poland, in turn, has issued a formal request to create a permanent American military presence that would include the 5,000 troops that Trump intends to remove from Germany. Currently, 10,000 American troops are stationed in Poland. The Russian attacks on NATO's eastern flank, mainly in the form of drone incursions, have highlighted the dangers that the military alliance confronts.

The bottom line is that an American leadership role in Europe is not an option. It is essential. There have been previous periods of tension—during the 1960s, when Charles de Gaulle removed France from NATO's integrated military command and during the 1980s, when the Euromissile crisis occurred—but they have never led to the dissolution of NATO itself. At the Ankara summit, Trump should seek to strengthen, not undermine, a military alliance that has since its inception in 1949 successfully promoted two main goals: deterring Russian aggression and bolstering American power and influence around the globe. \*

#### JACOB HEILBRUNN

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# FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE AND THE BALTICS



Credit: Reuters/Piroschka Van De Wouw



by Melinda Haring

**N**ATO doesn't face the threat of an attack from Russia. It's already being attacked. Stymied in Ukraine, where Russian troops have failed to seize fresh territory over the past year, President Vladimir Putin is upping the pressure on Europe by flying drones through NATO member states to probe the readiness of America and its allies to respond.

Consider some of the recent Russian incursions. On May 28, a Russian drone struck a ten-story apartment building in the Romanian city of Galați, injuring a woman and a child. This was not an isolated incident. In 2026 alone, Moscow's drones have entered Romanian airspace no less than 40 times. What's more, Russian drones have also landed in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, leading to the collapse of the coalition government in Riga after it responded impotently to two Russian drone incursions.

As I attended the annual Lennart Meri Conference in Estonia in May, I was bowled over by the depth of knowledge about Russian history and ambitions that exists in the region. The contrast with the United States, where Russian studies is a thing of the past, was striking. Throughout the conference, Europe's leading politicians and thinkers debated how to counter

Russia most effectively and whether Europe has stepped up enough. There were panels on China, intelligence and Ukraine. The mood was dramatically different from what I experienced in Ukraine six months earlier. Ukraine was now on a roll and the consensus of the conference was that it can hold out indefinitely against Russia. The conference itself was titled "Fortune Favours the Brave."

During the conference, the signs of Russian bullying could hardly have been more acute. Finland scrambled fighter jets after a Russian drone looked as though it might arc into Helsinki region <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/15/finland-ends-drone-alert-amid-regional-fears-of-ukraine-war-overspill>. Fortunately, the drone didn't appear. Only after ordering its citizens in the Uusimaa region indoors and closing the Helsinki airport for nearly three hours did the government sound the all-clear signal.

Russia's hybrid tactics are not new. Dozens of reports have detailed Moscow's dirty deeds in Europe, from manipulating elections to shooting opposition leaders in broad daylight. What's new is that the menace from Moscow can be detected in NATO airspace with regularity--in the form of Shaheed drones that Putin has refined during its war of choice in Ukraine. 80 percent of the drones used in the last major strike in Kyiv were made in Iran.

Now that Kyiv's long-range drones and missiles are regularly striking Russia's oil and

gas facilities, NATO member states should expect more drones. Through electronic warfare, Moscow has a pattern of pulling Kyiv's drones off-course, into NATO countries--and then blaming Kyiv. When Kyiv launches long-range drones at Russia's expansive oil and gas storage facilities in Ust-Luga, the parabola can easily be diverted into Latvia and Estonia, all courtesy of Russia's electronic war specialists. Expect to see more and more of these instances.

The Baltic states in particular are cognizant of the threat that Moscow poses but they lack sufficient sophisticated air defense systems and fighter jets. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Baltic Air Policing mission provides constant watch over the Baltic states--through rotational forces based in Lithuania and Estonia--that are ready to be launched by NATO's Combined Air Operations Center. The Air Forces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania support the mission through air command and control infrastructure and personnel while other NATO member provide the jets and pilots. Much as during the cold war, Russian aircraft often fly near NATO airspace without turning on transponders, communicating with Air Traffic Control or filing a flight plan, so fighter aircraft assigned to NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission often go up to identify Russia's planes. Given Russian behavior, it may be wondered whether Moscow believes that the cold war ever ended in the first place.

Unfortunately, NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission isn't sufficient to address the growing threat. But the allies are stepping up in more than a merely ceremonial fashion. Germany has vowed to up its spending on national security, but Tallinn and Riga already devote 5 percent of their GDPs to defense. At the same time, a joint Estonia-Ukrainian company has successfully tested drone interceptors in Ukraine.

Estonia doesn't manufacture air defense systems, but it does build sensors used in the systems as well as drones and unmanned systems.

The Baltic states face the same problem that Washington, our Middle Eastern allies,

and Taiwan confront -- not enough Patriot interceptors are being built and the war in Iran has drained America's stockpiles. The Baltic states also lack deep strike capabilities and have asked Washington for help. The Trump administration should seek to ensure that they are able to attain this capability.

Kyiv will soon mitigate Russia's growing drone threat to NATO airspace by changing its rules on defense exports and selling its knowhow to its neighbors. Even before the full-scale war in 2022, a Ukrainian defense commission close to the presidential administration made arbitrary decisions about defense exports.

That all changes this summer. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is considering new rules to make the defense export process transparent and fast. Right now, Ukraine does not sell any finished defense products abroad. Once the Ukrainian president signs off on the changes, NATO's eastern flank should rest easier -- all while continuing to boost their defense budgets and stepping up domestic defense manufacturing.

The Baltic States have long been among the most outspoken and countries to warn about the grave threat Moscow poses to the democratic world. After spending a week in Helsinki, Narva, and Tallinn, I came away with the sense that Ukraine's decision to relax its regulations on inexpensive drones and missiles cannot arrive soon enough. Fortune does indeed favor the brave and the Baltics. \*

#### MELINDA HARING

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# A PEACE ETCHED IN SILICON

*As an international megaproject,  
AI is achieving what decades of  
diplomacy could not.*



by Ryan Fedasiuk

In the United States and many other countries today, AI is developing a bad rap. Propagandists are using the technology to flood the information commons, while autocrats supercharge state surveillance. A mounting obsession with digital sovereignty risks further fragmenting the internet into algorithmically curated tribes. The pessimists are not wrong to point out AI's significant risks. But they have mistaken a hazard for destiny—and in doing so, they have missed the most consequential diplomatic story of the modern age.

Within a single 48-hour period in January, Israel and Qatar acceded to the same American-led diplomatic framework: Pax Silica, a coalition organized by Under Secretary of State Jacob Helberg to secure the supply chains that underpin AI's development. It was a remarkable feat. After decades of shuttle diplomacy struggled to put Jerusalem and Doha at the same table, the economics of AI had managed to effectively fast-track a sort of diplomatic normalization, by granting both governments equity in a project larger than the Levant.

International collaboration is an indelible feature of the physical AI supply chain. No country commands the full stack of technical

inputs required to unlock superintelligence, or even serve today's AI models to billions of monthly active users. The United States may design the world's most advanced chips and produce its frontier AI models, but U.S. labs depend on Taiwan to manufacture them, on South Korea for high-bandwidth memory, on the Netherlands for lithography, and on Japan for specialty chemicals used to print circuit boards. The Gulf states bring energy and capital; Australia and Nordic states bring rare minerals; and Israel brings a robust chip design ecosystem that will sustain global innovation.

Fifteen countries have signed the Pax Silica declaration since December, with Taiwan formally endorsing its principles through a creative diplomatic arrangement of its own. It is billed as a "coalition of capabilities," designed to give countries with little else in common a shared project—and a stake in one another's success. Qatari capital, Israeli engineering, Filipino assembly, and Norwegian sovereign wealth are today all contributing to a shared technology stack. Fort Foundry One, the flagship semiconductor facility now planned in Israel under a 99-year lease, is a prime example of a project spanning the efforts of a dozen nations.

Skeptics will note that commercial interdependence has failed to live up to its promise as an international peacemaker. The difference is that AI is not merely an industry, but a discrete megaproject—one whose fate is

shared, and steered, by each hand contributing to its production. The trillions of dollars already committed to global data center buildouts are sure to transfigure entire economies. Yet this investment is fully interdependent with the billions spent scaling up the production of switchgear manufactured in Germany, fiber optic cables made in Japan, and dozens of other supply chains spanning the industrial world.

There is a second reason to believe AI's ties will bind: A decades-long engineering project is more resilient to disruption, and harder to dial back, than standard commodities trade. A country that builds its digital infrastructure on American chips, American cloud platforms, and American models is not merely trading with the United States, but embedding itself in an ecosystem with switching costs that persist for decades, alongside every other country that made the same choice. Once built, silicon bridges are hard to burn.

But infrastructure is only half of the assignment. The pessimists' nightmare—AI as an engine of autocratic repression or social division—will come true by default in societies that import the technology without an adequate civic immune system. And so, at the same time they collaborate to engineer physical infrastructure, free and open societies will likewise embed shared values as an enduring source of geopolitical power. Some, though not all, of the partners collaborating to build AI will share an interest in establishing content provenance standards that let citizens verify what is real, or boost AI literacy for students and educators. Still others will see value in designing products that reject censorship—giving rise to AI models that will argue fluently and honestly in Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, and Tagalog.

The divisive uses of AI are not evenly distributed across political systems. Whereas AI models developed independently in autocracies are sure to help governments filter speech and harden instruments of state repression, there exists a vast, global market for tools that put capabilities in the hands of individuals—as

tutors for underserved students, encrypted communication channels for dissidents. In the age of AI, the task before likeminded democracies is to ensure that market remains well-served—by pooling resources to build technology that liberates power instead of concentrating it.

None of this is guaranteed. If Pax Silica's signature projects do not convert into steel and silicon, the coalition could deflate optimism in American leadership instead of making the case for collaboration. Rising energy costs and the impulse to own every facet of AI's development could derail promising leads. And a Washington that treats partners as vassals rather than stakeholders will generate exactly the backlash a multilateral megaproject cannot afford.

The choice before the United States and its partners is coming into focus. AI will sow division wherever its diffusion is left to adversaries and accident. It will build bridges wherever America organizes the building—deliberately, generously, and with the confidence that a technology born of free societies, deployed through coalitions of free societies, will carry their values with it. \*

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# ISRAEL'S NUCLEAR DETERRENCE CASTING A WIDER "NET"

Credit: Reuters



by Louis René Beres

**E**ven after “Operation Roaring Lion” and America’s “Operation Epic Fury,” Israel’s presumptive nuclear weapons remain essential for deterrence of nuclear threats. There are also foreseeable circumstances in which these weapons could deter certain non-nuclear threats. Most plausible, in this connection, would be circumstances in which the enemy threats referenced large-scale conventional attacks (whether first-strike attacks or retaliatory attacks) and/or chemical/biological harms.

#### ISSUES AND CORRELATES

What do such complex circumstances signify in tactical or operational terms? To begin, Israel’s deterrence posture identifies two seemingly distinct modes of strategic dissuasion: conventional and nuclear. Further to the intentionally opaque nature of this traditional posture (i.e., “deliberate nuclear ambiguity”), Israel’s nuclear deterrence would not come into play until all forms of conventional deterrence had been exhausted.

But to fully understand all this, background will be important. Before suffering setbacks from the coinciding American and Israeli operations in 2026, Iran had regarded Israel as a “one bomb state,” as a despised adversary subject to “removal” by a single nuclear bomb. Though annihilationist *ipso facto*, this strategic

view was not entirely propagandistic. It was easily confirmable, as Alfred North Whitehead once observed, by the “laws of physics.”

Such “laws” ought never to be disregarded in matters of military deterrence. Still, Israel’s national survival is never just about a designated enemy’s military capabilities. Rather, it remains closely connected to this enemy’s presumed willingness to risk existential harms.

Specifics are important. There will be many underlying details. Assuming enemy rationality, enemy willingness will depend in large part on the credibility of Israel’s deterrence posture. As for non-rational state enemies, attention and assets should both be allocated to variously graduated preemption options. Regarding Israel’s survival as a state, these allocations are always of primary importance. In essence, therefore, what is needed in Jerusalem is a comprehensive framework for competitive risk-taking that offers “seamless” retaliatory options.

When a country smaller than America’s Lake Michigan faces interpenetrating threats from state and sub-state adversaries, it requires a secure and flexible deterrent, one that could escalate in variously prefigured increments from non-nuclear weapons (chemical, biological, hypersonic and/or electromagnetic pulse ordnance) to theatre and/or strategic nuclear warfare. Supporting such an informed warning would entail a four-part intellectual understanding:

1. science-based judgments of probability must be based on the determinable frequency of relevant past events;
2. there has never been a relevant past event; i.e., a nuclear war;

3. maintaining visibly compelling conventional deterrence could make it less necessary for Israel to escalate to nuclear threats/nuclear conflict; and

4. aptly measured nuclear threats could enhance the persuasiveness of Israel’s conventional threats.

There are also several antecedent questions:

How might Israel actually find itself involved in a nuclear war?

Under what specific circumstances could Israel discover itself involved (whether wittingly or unwittingly) with belligerent nuclear weapons use?

To answer these questions, Israeli analysts will need to integrate critical military aspects of their investigations with authoritative legal standards.

#### WHAT ARE THE RELEVANT THREATS TO ISRAEL?

For the moment, such integrative concerns could seem extraneous, gratuitous and without suitable empirical foundation. Israel, after all, remains the only nuclear weapons state in the region. Nonetheless, malleable order-of-battle considerations could change unexpectedly, perhaps even from moment to moment. This prospective “fluidity” appears most obvious in regard to diminishing threats from Iran and to potentially expanding threats from Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan or North Korea.

Sometimes, in strategic matters, truth must emerge through paradox. Even without an already-nuclear adversary in the region, Israel could find itself having to rely on calibrated nuclear deterrence against biological and/or conventional threats.

In late September 2024, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov openly proclaimed Russia’s right to introduce nuclear weapons into any future conflict with Ukraine-supporting NATO states. Though not a Middle Eastern theatre of warfare, the idea of threatening escalation to nuclear weapons in response to

“unacceptable” sub-nuclear belligerence is still concerning. Conceptually, the dynamics of calculated threat would be similar or identical. These dynamics would be universal.

In all foreseeable cases, Israel’s nuclear doctrine and strategy should remain oriented to deterrence, not nuclear war-fighting. Plausibly, with such an understanding in mind, Jerusalem has already taken steps to reject tactical or “battlefield” nuclear weapons and to disavow any correlative plans for nuclear counter-force targeting.

For Israel, nuclear weapons can make sense only for deterrence *ex ante*; not revenge *ex post*. In “eleventh-hour” circumstances, taking this sensible position could mean crossing the nuclear threshold against a dangerous and determined non-nuclear adversary. As rational strategy, any such intent will need to be made known before Jerusalem would need to actualize any such nuclear threat.

There are associated legal issues. Contrary to conventional wisdom, nuclear deterrence and associated forms of nuclear strategy that include preemption could support expectations of international law. But the adequacy of international law in preventing nuclear war in the Middle East will depend on more than formal treaties, customs or “the general principles of law recognized by civilized nations.” It will also depend on the success or failure of particular country strategies in the region and on the “will” of adversarial states to maintain certain shared intellectual understandings. If Israel’s nuclear strategy could successfully reduce the threat of a regional nuclear war, whether because of compelling nuclear deterrence or by defensive first-strikes strikes, it deserves to be considered a legitimate component of international law enforcement.

#### PERTINENT SCENARIOS

Realistic threat scenarios should remind Israel of its always-overriding need for comprehensive nuclear theory, an inductive-deductive explanatory framework based on

systematic and systemic thought. Among other things, this reminder would postulate a counter-value targeted nuclear retaliatory force that is recognizably secure from enemy first-strikes and recognizably capable of penetrating that state's active defenses. To best meet such imperative security expectations, the IDF would be well-advised to continue with evident sea-basing (submarines) of nuclear deterrent force. Optimally, such steps would become part of a broader policy shift from "deliberate nuclear ambiguity" to "selective nuclear disclosure."

To satisfy equally important requirements of "penetration-capability," Jerusalem will have to stay visibly ahead of enemy air-defense refinements. If duly followed, such positioning could enhance not "only" Israel's national security, but also more general prospects for nuclear war avoidance. "Everything is very simple in war," says Clausewitz, in his classical discussion of "friction" (*On War*), "but the simplest thing is still difficult."

How might Israel become actively involved in a nuclear war? In response, four basic scenarios present themselves: Nuclear Retaliation; Nuclear Counter-Retaliation; Nuclear Preemption; and Nuclear Warfighting. All these scenarios could be impacted by ongoing and potentially intersecting conflict situations in North Korea/South Korea; Russia/China/Ukraine or India/Pakistan.

Strategically and jurisprudentially, the world security regime represents a system. Accordingly, what happens in any one place could have notable and palpable effects in other places. Moreover, the investigation of pertinent scenarios should always be considered an intellectual task, hence, not one amenable to resolution by politicians or pundits.

### 1. NUCLEAR RETALIATION

If in the future an enemy state should launch a nuclear first-strike against Israel, Jerusalem would respond legally and to whatever extent possible with a nuclear retaliatory strike. If enemy first-strikes were to involve other forms

of unconventional weapons, including high-lethality biological mass-destruction weapons, Israel might still launch a permissible nuclear reprisal. Such an unprecedented response would depend in large measure on Israel's calculated expectations of follow-on aggression and its assessments of comparative damage-limitation.

If Israel were to absorb "only" a massive conventional attack, a nuclear retaliation could still not be ruled out, especially if: (a) Israel's

adversary were perceived to hold nuclear, and/or other unconventional weapons in reserve; and/or (b) Israel's leaders were to believe that exclusively non-nuclear retaliations could not prevent destruction/annihilation of the Jewish State. A nuclear retaliation by Israel could be ruled out only in seemingly evident circumstances where enemy aggressions were conventional, "typical" (sub-existential or consistent with previous instances of enemy attack in magnitude/intent)

and hard-target oriented (that is, directed only toward Israeli weapons and military infrastructures, not to "soft" civilian populations).

### 2. NUCLEAR COUNTER-RETALIATION

Should Israel ever feel compelled to preempt enemy nuclear aggression with conventional weapons, the target state's response (assuming rationality) would likely determine Jerusalem's



Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system intercepts rockets launched from the Gaza Strip. Reuters/Amir Cohen

next moves. If this response were in any way nuclear, Israel could expectedly turn to nuclear counter-retaliation. If this retaliation were to involve other weapons of mass destruction, Israel might feel pressed to take an appropriate escalatory initiative. Any such initiative would reflect the presumed need for what is formally described in strategic parlance as “escalation dominance.”

All authoritative decisions would depend on Jerusalem’s early judgments of adversarial intent and its accompanying calculations of essential damage-limitation. Should the enemy state response to Israel’s preemption be limited to hard-target conventional strikes, it is unlikely that the Jewish State would move on to consider nuclear counter-retaliations. If, however, the enemy’s conventional retaliation was plainly “all-out” and directed toward Israeli civilian populations – not just to Israeli military targets – an Israeli nuclear counter-retaliation could not be excluded ipso facto. It could also be permissible under international law.

Such a unique counter retaliation could be ruled out only if the enemy’s conventional retaliation were proportionate to Israel’s preemption; confined exclusively to Israeli military targets; circumscribed by legal limits of “military necessity” (a limit routinely codified in the law of armed conflict) and accompanied by explicit and verifiable assurances of non-escalatory intent.

### 3. NUCLEAR PREEMPTION

It is implausible that Israel would ever decide to launch a preemptive nuclear strike. Though circumstances could arise in which such a strike would be technically rational and ascertainably legal, it is still unlikely that Israel would ever allow itself to reach such “all or nothing” vulnerabilities. Moreover, unless nuclear weapons were employed in a fashion still consistent with the laws of war – aka the law of armed conflict – this form of preemption would represent a flagrant violation of binding international rules.

Even if such consistency were possible, the psychological/political impact of nuclear weapons use on the world community would be negative and far-reaching. This means, among other things, that an Israeli nuclear preemption could be expected only where (a) a state enemy had acquired nuclear and/or other weapons of mass destruction presumed capable of annihilating the Jewish State; (b) this adversarial state had made clear that its military intentions paralleled its capabilities; (c) this enemy was believed ready to begin an operational “countdown to launch;” and (d) Jerusalem believed that Israeli non-nuclear preemptions could not possibly achieve the needed minimum levels of damage-limitation – that is, levels consistent with physical preservation of state and nation.

### 4. NUCLEAR WAR FIGHTING

Should nuclear weapons be introduced into actual conflict between Israel and an enemy state, nuclear war fighting at one level or another would ensue. This would be true so long as: (a) enemy first-strikes against Israel would not destroy Jerusalem’s second-strike nuclear capability; (b) enemy retaliations for an Israeli conventional preemption would not destroy Jerusalem’s nuclear counter-retaliatory capability; (c) Israeli preemptive strikes involving nuclear weapons would not destroy adversarial second-strike nuclear capabilities; and (d) Israeli retaliation for enemy conventional first-strikes would not destroy enemy nuclear counter-retaliatory capabilities.

It follows that in order to satisfy its most essential survival requirements, Israel should take immediate steps to ensure the likelihood of (a) and (b) above, and the unlikelihood of (c) and (d).

### AN HISTORICAL PRIDE OF PLACE

Though it is most important for Israel to stay-focused on measurable and scientific assessments of nuclear war fighting, it is clear that less tangible consequences should also be

noted. At the onset of their once-unimaginable sufferings, the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki found themselves, in psychologist Bruno Bettelheim’s words, an “anonymous mass,” or in the Japanese term, *muga-muchu*, “without self, without a center.” For the future of war and peace in the Middle East, such total disruptions of individual and social order produced unforeseeable outcomes, ones that extended far beyond any immediate physical or emotional losses.

There is more. The exterminatory effects of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan were not confined to immediate or long-term experiences of those who bore direct witness, but were extended to their rescuers and the progeny of these rescuers. It would not be unreasonable to expand the survivor category of *hibakusha* to include children of Japanese mothers who did not experience the atomic explosions themselves.

Soon, Jerusalem will need to consider a prompt end to “deliberate nuclear ambiguity.” By selectively removing the “bomb” from its metaphoric “basement,” Israel’s strategic planners would be better positioned to enhance the credibility of the country’s nuclear deterrence posture. Ironically, any enhancements of Israel’s nuclear deterrent could effectively support wider objectives of applicable international law.

In Israel’s strategic nuclear planning, would-be state aggressors, whether nuclear or non-nuclear, should be encouraged to believe that Jerusalem maintains the willingness to launch measured nuclear forces in retaliation and that these forces are sufficiently invulnerable to first-strike attacks. Additionally, these enemies should be encouraged to expect that Israel’s designated nuclear forces could reliably penetrate their ballistic-missile and air defenses.

Though counter-intuitive, Israel and parts of the wider region would benefit from Jerusalem’s release of selectively broad outlines of the country’s continuously evolving strategic

orientations. Without a prior and well-fashioned strategic doctrine, no such release could make persuasive deterrent sense. At the same time, a too-firm release could be interpreted as an explicit rejection of NPT (Nonproliferation Treaty) objectives. Though this is an agreement to which Israel is not a party, it is generally regarded as a stabilizing nuclear “benchmark.”

Selectively-released Israeli nuclear information could support the perceived utility and security of Israel’s nuclear retaliatory forces. Once suitably disclosed, national nuclear strategy should center on the targeting, hardening, dispersion, multiplication, basing, and yield of all operational ordnance. **Under certain easily-imagined conditions, the credibility of Israeli strategic deterrence could vary inversely with the perceived destructiveness of its nuclear weapons.**

During the spring of 2026, the importance of this counter-intuitive notion was lost on US President Donald J. Trump. To wit, vis-à-vis war with Iran, Israel’s most important ally threatened “obliteration” and the “destruction of an entire civilization.” These crude threats were not just less purposeful than plausibly-calibrated options, they also represented flagrant violations of authoritative international law.

There is more. Unsurprisingly, there will be many interrelated policy concerns, all with some measure or other of legal significance. One such concern underscores that Israel will need to prepare differently (yet subtly) for military engagements with an expectedly-rational nuclear adversary than with an irrational foe. In such nuanced circumstances, national decision-makers in Jerusalem would need to distinguish meaningfully between genuine enemy irrationality and feigned enemy irrationality.

This could be a “tough call.” How should Israeli decision-makers be expected to make such inherently imprecise distinctions? Is this even a reasonable strategic expectation?

In all refined studies of world politics, rationality and irrationality have taken on specific meanings. An actor (state or sub-state)

is determinedly rational to the extent that its leadership always values collective survival more highly than any other preference or combination of preferences. Conversely, an irrational actor would not always display such an ascertainable preference ordering. *Apropos* of scientific limitations discussed above, determining whether such an adversary was rational or irrational would prove a bewilderingly inexact “science.”

In actual practice, operationalizing these potentially indecipherable distinctions would present complex intellectual challenges. *Inter alia*, the task would need to take account of whether scrutinized adversaries were (1) fully or partially sovereign states; (2) sub-national terrorist groups; or (3) “hybrid” enemies comprised of state and sub-state foes. A subsidiary but still-daunting task would be to figure out the ratio of decision-making responsibilities among hybridized foes. To successfully avoid a nuclear war in the Middle East, Jerusalem will need to confront variously subtle points of deterrence and fully clarify Israel’s formal position on Palestinian statehood.

### THE PRIMACY OF “MIND”

Whatever calculable nuances would be encountered in Jerusalem, the only rational way for Israel to successfully meet these growing and overlapping challenges will be to stay ahead of its adversaries through superior powers of strategic erudition. In classical Greece and Macedonia, linked arts of war and deterrence were described by military planners as challenges of “mind over mind,” not just narrow contests of “mind over matter.” At conceptual levels, such ancient descriptions remain valid for Israel.

One further observation concerns Israel’s nuclear strategy and American national security. Though analysts generally examine the foreseeable impact of US nuclear guidance upon Israel, it is equally important to consider the impact of Israel’s nuclear strategy on US national security. Though largely unrecognized,

there exists an ongoing and reciprocal connection between these two factors, a sort of continuous policy feedback-loop. Going forward, this “loop” should be examined more as a dynamic relationship than as a static or one-directional connection.

A starting point should be as follows: The suitability and durability of Israel’s nuclear strategy will impact not only the Middle East, legally and strategically, but also American national security. To the extent that Israel’s nuclear policies could have “spillover” effects for the United States, America could become the unintentional beneficiary of Israel’s strategic scholarship and planning. It also follows that if Israel’s nuclear posture should somehow fail to meet that country’s most urgent or existential security expectations, the derivative effect on the United States would be correspondingly negative.

Virtually any Israeli scholarship focused on nuclear war avoidance will be offered in at least partial response to world security configurations shaped by the United States. In this connection, Jerusalem will need to pay special attention to the changing face of US-Russian adversity. In this connection, it is no longer preposterous to foresee an American president standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his Russian counterpart against NATO.

If, nonetheless, geopolitical competition between the superpowers should become more tangibly war-oriented in Asia – most notably in regard to ongoing North Korean nuclear enhancements or Chinese military actions against Taiwan – it could have determinative effects on Israel’s nuclear posture and on a Middle Eastern nuclear war. On such effects, it ought not to be disregarded that (1) a nuclear war is logically possible with only one nuclear belligerent (i.e., an “asymmetrical nuclear war”) as well as with two or more nuclear adversaries (a “symmetrical nuclear war”); and (2) a nuclear war could be “symmetrical” even if one belligerent were seemingly “more powerful” than the other(s).



An Iron Dome interceptor system is seen on an Israeli missile boat. Jack Guez/Pool via Reuters

In all such matters, history will deserve increasingly disciplined attention. Earlier, North Korea helped Syria build a nuclear reactor, the same facility that was subsequently destroyed by Israel in Operation Orchard on September 6, 2007. Unlike Israel’s earlier Operation Opera, this preemptive attack, in the Deir ez-Zor region of Syria, was a second expression of the “Begin Doctrine.” It also portended, because of its North Korea connection, a much wider global threat to Israel.

Deleterious effects would likely be most dramatic if there were ever to be any direct nuclear exchange between the United States and North Korea. Similar connections could obtain in the aftermath of an India-Pakistan nuclear exchange, and would depend largely on specific and still-ascertainable Russian/American/Chinese alignments with Delhi or Islamabad.

In both prospective conflict dyads – US-North Korea and India-Pakistan – any tangible expressions of nuclear belligerence could immediately impact Israel’s nuclear strategy and Middle East regional security.

For Israel, greater familiarity with jurisprudential principles could advance the nation’s legal as well as strategic obligations, most plainly those that jurist William Blackstone famously expressed in his *Commentaries on the Law of England* (Book 4 “Of Public Wrongs”): “Each state is expected, perpetually,” noted Blackstone, “to aid and enforce the law of nations, as part of the common law, by inflicting an adequate punishment upon the offenses against that universal law.”

Such ideas don’t just “pop up” *ex nihilo*. Blackstone is ultimately indebted to Cicero’s

description of natural law in *The Republic*: “True law is right reason, harmonious with nature, diffused among all, constant, eternal; a law which calls to duty by its commands and restrains from evil by its prohibitions....”

### NUCLEAR WAR AND JUSTICE

“Just wars,” wrote Hugo Grotius “arise from our love of the innocent.” Now, however, it is plain even by definition that a nuclear war could never be truly “just,” and that certain earlier legal distinctions (e.g., “just war” vs. “unjust war”) should be conformed to the changing technologies of military destruction. The only sensible adaptation in this regard should be to acknowledge timeless connections between international law and natural law and to oppose retrograde movements by powerful states to undermine such acknowledgments.

In the final analysis, to successfully prevent a nuclear war in the Middle East, it will be necessary to resist any world-system legitimations of belligerent nationalism. Nuclear deterrence and conventional deterrence are never best contemplated as separate security postures. Always, these seemingly discrete protective strategies are strongly interpenetrating and mutually reinforcing. Even while Israel remains the only regional nuclear power, its nuclear weapons and doctrine could be used to deter certain massive conventional aggressions from formidable state enemies.

A nuclear attack or nuclear war in the Middle East is not out of the question. It is never a casually dismissible prospect, even if Israel should remain the only nuclear weapons state in the region. How is this possible? The correct answer lies in the irremediably complex and deeply-nuanced structure of nuclear warfare possibilities, in the Middle East especially, but also anywhere else that a nuclear conflict is logically possible.

There is more. An atomic war could arrive in Israel not only as a “bolt-from-the-blue” enemy nuclear missile attack, but also by intended or unintended escalations. If, for example, an

enemy state was to begin hostilities by launching “only” conventional attacks on Israel, Jerusalem could decide to respond, sooner or later, foolishly or wisely, with precisely calculated and correspondingly graduated nuclear reprisals. Alternatively, if these enemy states were to commence conflict by releasing certain larger-scale conventional or biological attacks upon Israel, Jerusalem’s conventional reprisals could be met, at least in the future, with enemy nuclear counterstrikes.

In the past, Israeli conventional preemptions have figured importantly as presumptive remedies for nuclear threat. Reasonably, if it hadn’t been for Israel’s earlier defensive first-strike operations against Iraq and Syria (Operation Opera and Operation Orchard, respectively), the Middle East would already have suffered destabilizing impacts of Arab/Islamist nuclear forces. Looking back on these critical examples of anticipatory self-defense, Israel had effectively ensured that jihadist terror groups would not become nuclear. The impact of these complex military operations benefited not only Israel, but also the United States and assorted allies.

Still, for the Middle East, the regional future is apt to become substantially less secure. With a still-aspirational nuclear Iran, derivative risks of nuclear terrorism could become intolerable. Some of these expected risks might not be confined to the Middle East. In one form or other, they could “carry over” to American and/or European homelands.

By maintaining a credible conventional deterrent, Israel could most reasonably reduce its potential exposure to nuclear warfighting. A fully persuasive Israeli non-nuclear deterrent, at least to the extent it would prevent large-scale conventional enemy attacks, could lower the country’s overall risk of exposure to unmanageable variants of nuclear escalation. In the specific lexicon of nuclear strategy, Israel could reap multiple security gains by staying in conspicuous control of “escalation dominance.” Taken together, these gains could prove indispensable.

### FORESEEABLE DETERRENCE CONNECTIONS

Certain noteworthy strategic possibilities will warrant special mention. Any rational state enemy considering attacks against Israel using chemical and/or biological weapons would take more seriously Israel’s nuclear deterrent. Inter alia, this argument suggests that a strong conventional capability will always be needed to deter or preempt certain large conventional attacks.

Inevitably, in seeking to continually reassess their own military power positions, Israel’s enemies will strive to determine how Jerusalem views its own conventional weapon opportunities and limitations. If these enemies did not perceive any Israeli sense of expanding conventional force weakness and were driven by expectations of Israeli unwillingness to escalate to nonconventional weapons, they could decide rationally to attack first. The net result could include: (1) defeat of Israel in a conventional war; (2) defeat of Israel in an unconventional (chemical/biological/nuclear) war; (3) defeat of Israel in a combined conventional/unconventional war; or (4) defeat of enemy state(s) by Israel in an unconventional war.

Ironically for Israel, even the “successful” fourth possibility could prove net-negative. This counter-intuitive conclusion should once again bring to mind Israel’s increasingly outdated “bomb in the basement.” Always, the credibility of Israel’s nuclear deterrent will depend in part on the perceived “usability” of its nuclear arsenal. Should Israel’s still-ambiguous nuclear weapons be regarded by prospective attackers as high-yield, indiscriminate, “city-busting” (*counter-value*) weapons, rather than as minimal-yield, “war fighting” (*counterforce*) ordnance, they might not deter.

Conceivably, and contrary to virtually all conventional wisdom on the subject, successful Israeli nuclear deterrence could vary inversely with perceived destructiveness. Going forward,

this means that Israel’s necessary nuclear deterrent will require not only recognizably secure second-strike forces, but also weapons that could be used in “real war.” It further suggests that continued Israeli policies of “deliberate nuclear ambiguity” would encourage erroneous and aggressive calculations by prospective attackers.

On one occasion or another, this out-of-date security policy could fatally undermine Israel’s nuclear deterrent. The supposedly valid counter-argument that an Israeli end to “deliberate nuclear ambiguity” would encourage new enemy state nuclearization is based neither on historical evidence nor valid logical inference. From time immemorial, states have almost always done what would presumably maximize their survival interests. Rarely, if at all, have states been animated by more general interests of an improved world order.

There is more. In matters of Israeli nuclear deterrence, it ought never to be minimized that adversarial perceptions will be determinative. Unintentionally, to be sure, by keeping its nuclear doctrine and tangible capacity in the “basement,” Israel could contribute to an impression among pertinent enemies that its nuclear weapons are not operationally usable. In such circumstances, recalcitrant state enemies, unconvinced of Israel’s willingness to actually employ its nuclear weapons, might calculate the cost-effectiveness of striking first themselves. Depending on the particular circumstances, such adversarial acceptance could be either reluctant or enthusiastic, but still yield the same or similarly negative outcome for Israel. In Jerusalem, *prima facie*, any such adversarial presumptions would be unacceptable.

### CONSEQUENCES OF FAILED MILITARY DETERRENCE

A nuclear war would not respect political or geographic boundaries. Because of the particular manner in which nuclear explosions behave in the atmosphere, the altitude reached by a

distinctive mushroom-shaped cloud would depend primarily upon forces of the explosion. For yields in the low-kiloton range, this cloud would stay situated in the lower atmosphere. Its effects would be almost entirely “local.” For yields exceeding thirty kilotons, however, parts of the cloud of radioactive debris could “punch” into the stratosphere, thereby afflicting the launching state and particular noncombatant states together.

To prevent a regional nuclear war, Israel will need to field a fully-dependable nuclear deterrent. At the same time, it cannot rely on this necessary basis of national security doctrine any more than it can depend solely on conventional deterrence. Instead, it must depend on complementary nuclear/conventional forces/doctrine, variously interpenetrating systems of air defense and on the predictable availability of eleventh-hour preemption options.

In the volatile Middle East, military deterrence is a “game” that sane national leaders will have to play. For Israel, this ought always to be judged a game of strategy, not one of chance. This means, among other things, a continuing willingness to respect the full range of doctrinal complexity and to forge ahead with appropriate and presumptively advantageous security policies. To successfully influence the choices that fearsome state adversaries could make vis-à-vis Israel, Jerusalem will need to clarify that its conventional and nuclear deterrence postures are seamlessly interpenetrating and that the nation stands ready to counter enemy attacks at absolutely every level of possible confrontation.

#### THERE REMAIN JUST TWO FINAL POINTS:

**First**, whether Israel’s overlapping deterrent processes are geared primarily toward conventional or nuclear threats, their ultimate success will depend on the expected rationality of relevant enemies. In residual cases where enemy rationality appears implausible, Jerusalem could find itself under continuous

pressure to strike preemptively. If Jerusalem’s expected responses were to be judged both rational and law-enforcing, they would need to include a wide-ranging option for “anticipatory self-defense.” Always, for Israel, regional conflict prospects should be curtailed at the lowest possible levels of controlled engagement. Under no circumstances should Israel feel compelled to preempt against an already-nuclear adversary. To avoid such circumstances should represent Jerusalem’s overriding security obligation.

**Second**, even the most meticulous plans for preventing a deliberately-inflicted nuclear conflict would not remove the always-attendant dangers of an inadvertent or accidental nuclear war. While an accidental nuclear war would necessarily be inadvertent, there are forms of inadvertent nuclear war that would not be caused by mechanical, electrical or computer error. Moreover, such consequential forms of unintentional nuclear conflict could represent the unexpected result of misjudgment or miscalculation, whether by (1) singular error committed by one or both sides to a two-party nuclear crisis escalation, or (2) unforeseen “synergies” between these misjudgments/miscalculations.

The only predictable element of a nuclear crisis involving Israel and an enemy state would lie in its unpredictability. More than anything else, this implies an insistent obligation by Jerusalem not only to remain vigilant about enemy capabilities and intentions (both singular and cumulative), but to stay relentlessly cautious about Israel’s variable capacities to control adversarial nuclear events.

#### IN THE END, IT’S AN INTELLECTUAL CONTEST

Even after its 2026 military successes against Iran, Israel is entering into a period of protracted uncertainty. Before it can fulfill its primary legal and security obligations during this period, the Jewish state’s most capable scholars should accept increasing responsibility

for meeting the strategic challenges of “mind.” In this regard, a core challenge will be deciphering the best course of action on nuclear matters whenever gainful action requires all relevant parties to cooperate. Florentine political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli had something potentially helpful to offer in his essay *On Fortune*:

The world is a stupendous machine, composed of innumerable parts, each of which being a free agent, has a volition and action of its own: and on this ground arises the difficulty of assuring success in any enterprise depending on the volition of numerous agents. We may set the machine in motion, and dispose every wheel to one certain end; but when it depends on the volition of any one wheel, and the correspondent action of every wheel, the result is uncertain.

Going forward, the only way for Israeli strategists and decision-makers to make operational sense of bewildering uncertainties will be to approach their task as one requiring continuously refined “nets.” Under no circumstances should this task be allowed to become the province of political or commercial elites, the sort of transformation now underway at America’s portentously redefined “Department of War.” If such fearful anti-intellectualism were also to become a *fait accompli* in Israel, that country’s theory-based security policies could be torn into irremediable tatters.

To ward off existential military harms, including certain unprecedented forms of surprise attack, Jerusalem will need a continuously coherent strategic deterrent, one that incorporates all conceivable threats within a structured system of calibrated reactions. In diverse situations, making measured nuclear threats could serve Israel’s deterrence objectives before pertinent enemy states “go nuclear,” and not “merely” because Israel’s conventional deterrent would have failed. Reciprocally, Israel’s conventional deterrence, if suitably fashioned, could lower the threshold for Jerusalem to make rational belligerent use of nuclear ordnance.

It’s time for policy-relevant conclusions. The principal “lesson” of the foregoing assessment can be summarized as follows: **Under no circumstances should Israel’s military planners embrace a concept of national security that regards conventional and nuclear deterrence as inherently sequential or mutually-exclusive.** Always, in Jerusalem, conventional and nuclear deterrence should be conceptualized as complementary, force-multiplying and theory-based objectives.

“Theory is a net,” reminds Karl Popper. “Only those who cast, can catch.” \*

#### LOUIS RENÉ BERES

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Credit: Reuters

# TOWARDS A CIVILIZATIONAL PERCEPTION OF THE JEWISH STATE



by Shmuel Sandler, Ben Mollov

In contemporary studies of international relations, the cultural background of foreign policy has become a central analytical tool for understanding how nations and non-state actors behave on the global stage. Scholars such as Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, and Benedict Anderson have demonstrated that states do not act solely according to material interests; rather, their foreign policies are deeply shaped by collective identities, historical narratives, and culturally embedded understandings of the self. It is within this broader theoretical framework that we advocate the idea that “Israel must be more than just the nation-state of the Jewish people.”

Seen through the lens of identity politics, this assertion gains deeper meaning. It parallels the observation sometimes made about China: that it is “a civilization pretending to be a country.” This comparison aligns with Samuel Huntington’s insight that many modern states are not merely political entities, but expressions of civilizational lineages that long predate the nation-state model. Identity politics highlights

precisely this point: states often act not only as sovereign units but as embodiments of older cultural and civilizational identities.

In this light — and drawing on the work of the prominent sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt — Israel can be understood not only as a sovereign state created to ensure the physical security of the Jewish people but also as a potential anchor for the renewal and evolution of Jewish civilization in the contemporary era. This civilizational framing situates Israel as the institutional expression of a transnational Jewish identity that spans geography, history, and culture.

Such a vision may also provide a new basis for rebuilding mutual confidence between Diaspora Jews and the Jewish state — a relationship that has been eroding for a long time. Identity politics helps explain this erosion: differing political cultures, competing identity narratives, and divergent communal priorities have strained the relationship. A civilizational understanding of Israel offers a shared identity framework that transcends these differences. This follows the vision of a World Jewish Community as articulated by the eminent political scientist Daniel J. Elazar. Furthermore, Elazar saw the Jewish people as united in covenant among themselves and along with all peoples of decency and goodwill. With the alienation of so much

of the populations of the Western world such larger framing can help to influence positively international perceptions of Israel.

Finally, this Jewish civilizational conception is highly relevant to Israel's position and perception in the Middle East. Too often, Israel has been assigned the role of an alien European entity. Identity politics exposes how such narratives function: they delegitimize Israel by framing it as externally imposed rather than indigenous. Recasting Israel as the political expression of an ancient Near Eastern civilization challenges this narrative and situates Israel within the region's own civilizational identity map.

### JEWISH CIVILIZATION IN A ZIONIST CONTEXT

Viewed from a historical outlook, this broader civilizational perspective echoes the foundational debates within the Zionist movement founded by Theodor Herzl. From its inception, Zionism grappled with the question of what kind of collective identity the Jewish people sought to restore — a political identity, a cultural-civilizational identity, or a synthesis of both.

One camp led by Herzl, emphasized the urgent need for a haven — a political refuge capable of protecting Jews from persecution. This was a state-centered identity, focused on sovereignty, security, and the basic functions of national self-determination. Leaders such as David Ben-Gurion and Ze'ev Jabotinsky articulated this approach, grounding Jewish identity in the modern nation-state model and its capacity to ensure physical survival.

Another camp envisioned Zionism as a spiritual project: the rebirth of Jewish culture, creativity, and prophetic ethical purpose in a modern setting. For these thinkers, the establishment of a state was not an end but a means to enable the flourishing of Jewish civilization — a civilization fundamentally rooted in the Bible and animated by ideals such as the aspiration to be “a light unto nations.”

Ahad Ha'am and Martin Buber were central representatives of this outlook, emphasizing cultural renaissance, ethical mission, and spiritual renewal as the core of Jewish collective identity. Ultimately, Ben-Gurion, as a nation builder, comprehended the importance of the spiritual mission and adopted some features of the cultural school.

Indeed, the two visions were not mutually exclusive, but they created a productive tension that continues to shape Israeli and Jewish discourse today. While, theoretically, the debate reflects two competing models of Jewish collective self-understanding: Israel as a nation-state versus Israel as the civilizational center of a global people. An ongoing interplay between these models remains one of the defining characters of Jewish political identity in the modern era.

### CURRENT CHALLENGES: SECURITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

Given Israel's challenging geopolitical environment, it is understandable that public attention centers heavily on immediate security concerns. The responsibilities of governance, defense, and national resilience are unavoidable realities of statehood. At the same time, focusing exclusively on these urgent needs risks narrowing the horizon of what Israel is meant to represent within the broader Jewish civilizational narrative.

A civilizational perspective invites a more expansive understanding of Israel's role. It suggests that beyond ensuring physical safety, the state can serve as a platform for moral and cultural renewal, ethical exploration, intellectual creativity, and global engagement. In identity-politics terms, this means that Israel is not only a security actor but also a symbolic and cultural center through which Jewish collective identity is continually reinterpreted and expressed.

Such a role positions Israel as a place where ancient spiritual traditions interact with modern challenges, generating new expressions

of Jewish thought, art, science, and social vision for the benefit of humanity. This civilizational mission also extends inward: Israel must meet the challenge of ensuring diversity within unity within its own body politic, cultivating a shared civic identity that embraces both Jews and non-Jews. Doing so strengthens Israel's legitimacy not only as a nation-state but as the living core of a global civilization.

### A CIVILIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE JEWISH STATE

Viewing Israel through a civilizational lens should not diminish its identity as a nation-state nor the role of the Jewish diaspora; rather, it situates that identity within a deeper historical continuum. A civilizational framing highlights the possibility that Israel can function simultaneously as a sovereign state and as a central pillar of a global Jewish civilization — one that includes both Israelis and Diaspora Jews, each contributing in distinct yet complementary ways. Most importantly, a civilizational vision that includes both Israel and the Jewish Diaspora may help reduce tensions between the American Jewish pluralistic community and the Jewish state, tensions that have grown as their political cultures and identity narratives have diverged.

This perspective also encourages a more expansive understanding of Israel's purpose. It suggests that the state's significance lies not only in its capacity to protect but also in its ability to inspire, to cultivate cultural vitality, and to serve as a meeting point between tradition and modernity. In identity-politics terms, Israel becomes not only a geopolitical actor but a symbolic and cultural engine — a place where ancient Jewish texts, values, and memories interact with contemporary challenges to generate new expressions of Jewish thought, art, science, and social vision.

Finally, conceiving Israel as the basis of a renewed Jewish civilization opens the door to a deeper dialogue between the Jewish and

Arab-Islamic civilizations rooted in the Middle East. Samuel Huntington himself advocated such encounters as a means of moderating the “clash of civilizations.” Much pioneering work has already been done, grounded in the strong structural and ethical parallels between Judaism and Islam — parallels that can foster mutual respect, self-respect, and enrichment through sustained dialogue. Expanding these efforts could form the basis for an eventual reconciliation between Islam and Judaism, a vision that Prime Minister Netanyahu has articulated at the United Nations in the spirit of the Abraham Accords. Indeed, the cultural spirit animating these Accords may represent the first building block of a major inter-civilizational encounter in the Middle East. \*

*This article is based upon a op-ed which appeared previously in the Jerusalem Post.*

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# WHAT DO THE GULF STATES REALLY WANT?



by Ahmed Charai

**T**here is a question Washington should ask more directly: what do the Gulf states really want?

The official language is familiar: de-escalation, sovereignty, dialogue, Palestinian rights, regional stability, and balanced relations. These are legitimate concerns. But behind the communiqués lies a harder reality. Gulf capitals know that Israel is no longer isolated. They know that Iran is not merely a difficult neighbor. They also know that saying one thing in Washington, another in Tehran, another in Jerusalem, and another to Arab public opinion has become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Let us be precise. The confrontation is not with the Iranian people, heirs to a great civilization and among the first victims of the regime that rules over them. The confrontation is with the Iranian regime: the Revolutionary Guards, the militias, hostage diplomacy, ballistic missiles, nuclear ambitions, and the systematic destabilization of Arab states in the name of resistance.

For decades, Gulf states have tried to manage Iran, traded with Iran, mediated with Iran, denounced Iran, accommodated Iran, and then

asked Washington — and sometimes Israel — to contain Iran. This contradiction can no longer be avoided.

Across the Gulf, Israel is no longer treated as a distant or isolated actor. Some relationships are formal. Others remain informal, indirect, or discreet. But the old taboo has been broken. Israel is now understood across the region as a military, technological, intelligence, economic, and strategic reality.

Yet several Gulf states continue to preserve relationships with the same Iranian regime that threatens their sovereignty. Some out of prudence. Some out of economic necessity. Some because ambiguity gives them room to maneuver. But ambiguity has a cost. In a dangerous region, permanent strategic ambiguity is not wisdom. It is exposure.

Oman is a useful example. When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Muscat, Oman showed that even without formal relations it understood Israel's regional weight. At the same time, Oman has maintained relations with Iran and has often presented itself as a mediator between Tehran and the West. This is consistent with Oman's traditional diplomatic culture: cautious, discreet, and focused on keeping channels open.

But diplomacy must also have direction. Mediation should not become a permanent substitute for strategic judgment. Oman's

challenge is to preserve its reputation as a serious diplomatic actor while recognizing that the Iranian regime is not simply one party among others. It is a hostile revolutionary power that has repeatedly used militias, coercion, and instability as instruments of regional destabilization.

Qatar presents another complicated case. No serious observer can deny its achievements: wealth, infrastructure, media influence, and a global profile far beyond its size. It hosts Al Udeid, the largest U.S. Air Force installation outside the United States and a central pillar of America's regional posture. It also shares with Iran the North Field/South Pars gas structure, one of the most important energy assets in the world, giving Doha a structural reason to avoid direct confrontation with Tehran.

Qatar has made itself useful by speaking to actors others refuse to meet. At times, this role has mattered. But usefulness is not the same as strategic responsibility. Mediation should reduce conflict, not make the mediator indispensable to conflict. The question is whether Doha is prepared to move from tactical usefulness to a more responsible regional role.

Saudi Arabia is the most consequential case. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has set an ambitious course to launch the Kingdom into a new era and, before the Gaza war reshaped the diplomatic landscape, made clear that normalization with Israel was no longer fantasy.

Saudi Arabia has also learned directly what the Iranian threat means. Its territory has been attacked. Its sovereignty has been tested. Its energy infrastructure has been targeted. Its leadership understands better than anyone the danger posed by Tehran's regional project. Yet Riyadh restored relations with Iran while still relying on the United States to contain that same threat.

This is not a simple contradiction. It reflects the caution of a state managing religion, public opinion, regional influence, energy markets, and security at the same time. But the essential

question remains: can Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy remain behind its private strategic assessment? The answer to that question will shape the future of the region.

Bahrain chose differently. It joined the Abraham Accords and normalized relations with Israel despite its vulnerability to Iranian pressure. That decision should not be underestimated. Bahrain does not have the strategic depth, wealth, of Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Its exposure is real. Its decision therefore carried a particular meaning.

Bahrain understood that sovereignty sometimes requires a public decision. It recognized that normalization with Israel was not only a diplomatic gesture, but a statement of strategic orientation. It also showed that smaller states can exercise leadership when they are prepared to define their interests clearly and act on them.

The importance of Bahrain is not size. It is precedent. By joining the Abraham Accords, Bahrain demonstrated that vulnerability does not always produce hesitation. Sometimes it produces resolve. In a region where many states privately acknowledge the same realities, Bahrain chose to act publicly.

The United Arab Emirates also made a strategic choice. It normalized relations with Israel not as symbolism, but as policy: technology, artificial intelligence, investment, defense modernization, logistics, and global relevance. Abu Dhabi understood that Israel was not merely a security actor, but also a partner in innovation, science, agriculture, medicine, entrepreneurship, and the modernization of regional economies.

The UAE has also shown that realism does not mean weakness. It has stood firmly against the Iranian regime's destabilizing project and understood the necessity of deterrence when that regime threatens sovereignty. This is the sophistication of the Emirati approach: strength without illusion, openness without naivety, and strategic patience without surrender.

The UAE's importance lies in this combination. It did not choose normalization as a temporary gesture or public relations exercise. It placed it inside a larger national strategy: diversification, technology, global connectivity, and regional stability. That is why the Emirati model matters. It shows that a Gulf state can confront danger while still building for the future.

This is why the Abraham Accords matter more today than ever.

The Accords were not only diplomatic agreements. They introduced a new political language for the Middle East: development over ideology, trade over hatred, technology over militias, and opportunity over permanent grievance.

For too long, dignity has been used as a slogan by regimes, militias, ideologues, and movements that offered young people anger instead of opportunity.

But young Arabs and young Persians do not need dignity as a word. They need it as a reality: education, jobs, capital, technology, training, business opportunities, and access to the modern economy.

This is the practical promise of the Abraham Accords. Israel brings technology, science, agriculture, medicine, defense, and entrepreneurship. The Gulf brings capital, ambition, infrastructure, logistics, and a young generation ready for transformation. Together, they can offer the region an alternative model.

That is what the Iranian regime fears most. It does not fear another speech. It fears a successful alternative.

Jared Kushner's role should also be recognized. Kushner understood that the Middle East could not be approached only through old formulas and inherited excuses. He listened widely. He connected security, economics, technology, legitimacy, and the aspirations of a younger generation. Then he helped translate that understanding into action.

Today, the Gulf states cannot continue to seek American protection, Israeli technology, Western legitimacy, Chinese markets, and

Iranian restraint while avoiding the burden of public strategic choice. That is not diplomacy. It is evasion.

The issue is not knowledge. Gulf leaders understand the danger. They understand Israel's value. They understand America's role. They understand what their young people want. The problem is not analysis. The problem is political courage.

The Gulf states must now decide what they want the Abraham Accords to become: a diplomatic trophy, or the foundation of a new regional order.

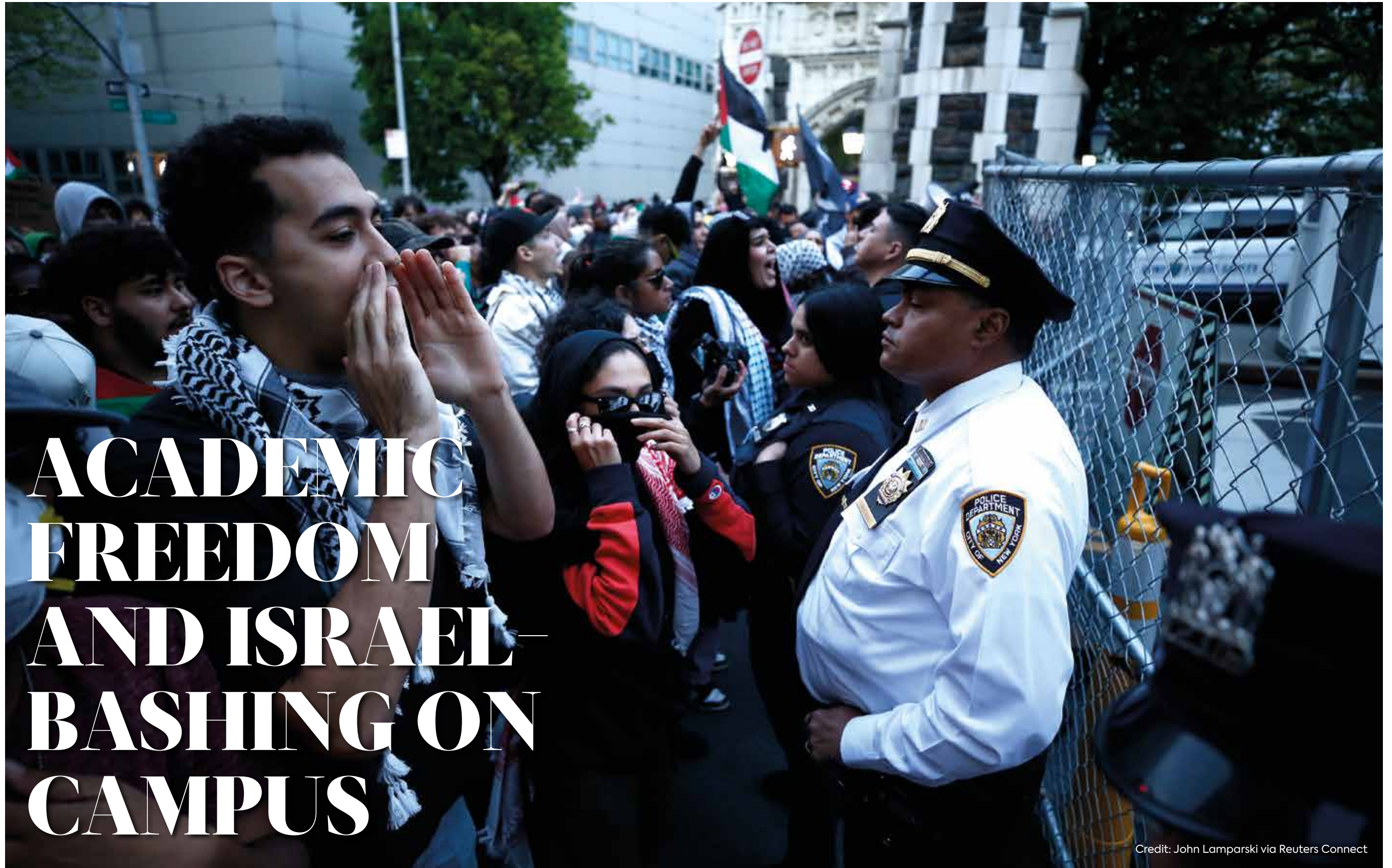
The Iranian regime offers militias, fear, isolation, and endless confrontation. The Abraham Accords offer education, opportunity, investment, technology, business, security, and access to modernity.

That is the choice before the region. Every Gulf capital should decide where it stands. \*

#### AHMED CHARAI

Publisher

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# ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND ISRAEL- BASHING ON CAMPUS

Credit: John Lamparski via Reuters Connect



by Edward H. Kaplan

What is it about the end of the school year that brings Israel-bashing on campus to the fore? Since the beginning of May alone: the New School's student government voted to outlaw their Hillel chapter, Swarthmore College was vandalized with hundreds of anti-Israel slogans spray-painted across campus property (including Hamas-inspired inverted red triangles), the Chair of the University of Michigan's Faculty Senate openly praised pro-Palestinian campus protesters for their actions over the past two years (and in his university commencement address no less), and Cornell University student agitators harassed the university's Jewish president as he was trying to leave a campus debate.

These recent events contrast with the Anti-Defamation League's annual antisemitism audit which reported a sharp drop in campus-related antisemitic incidents. While the frequency of the most visible forms of anti-Zionist hate – encampments, blockage and occupation of public spaces on campus, disruptive protests – has indeed declined since its peak activity towards the end of the 2024 academic year, the examples above show that anti-Israel sentiment remains strong on American university campuses.

So, what has happened at American universities since the spring of 2024? As the ADL notes, university administrations have adopted much stricter policies governing protest on campus. Known as “time, place and manner” restrictions, these policies are meant to allow students the right to free expression while preventing them from gathering at disruptive times or locations – for example outside classrooms while lectures or exams are

in process – and also from blocking community access to public spaces (including walking routes across campus). University enforcement of these rules is a good thing.

While time, place and manner rules have lessened the most visible forms of Israel-bashing on campus, a closer look at what is happening at universities shows that anti-Israel sentiment has not lessened. For example, the past year at Yale has witnessed student petitions to divest from companies specifically because of their ties to Israel, a campaign to censure Yale for enabling a donor-advised fund to pass-through a \$1 million donation to the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces (recognized by Charity Navigator with a 4-star rating, placing FIDF in the top 2% of charities in the United States), and an election for student government where candidates campaigned for the removal of time, place and manner restrictions while also voicing support for both the divestment and anti-FIDF initiatives above. Combined with myriad other anti-Israel actions on campus, the difficulty facing Jewish and Israeli students and faculty looms large.

Perhaps even more troubling is the following simple fact: given that newly arriving undergraduates spend four years on campus until graduating, this normalization of anti-Israel hostility is creating a dangerous institutional memory lapse. We are fast approaching a point where the entire undergraduate student body will have no memory of a university campus free from the current brand of agitation. For them, the “new normal” will simply be normal. The baseline of campus life will include a pervasive anti-Israel sentiment.

Indeed, Israel-bashing and antisemitism on campus has been displaced in ways that are difficult for an outsider to see. There has been no attempt to address the underlying ideology that leads to anti-Israel hatred on campus. Rather, in a remarkable confusion of two related concepts

– freedom of speech and academic freedom – over many years, anti-Israel sentiment has found its way into the very halls of academia under the guise of academic freedom.

As explained by Yale's former Law School Dean Robert Post, public free speech as assured by the First Amendment to the US Constitution was designed to protect an individual's right to express themselves in the public square. On the other hand, academic freedom exists to advance a university's core mission: the creation, preservation, teaching, and dissemination of knowledge. Unlike free speech, this mission requires academic discipline-based evaluative judgments. Professors grade papers, tenure committees evaluate scholarship, and admissions offices select students. In each case, speech is judged for its quality, rigor, and contribution to knowledge. Yet Israel-bashing persists on university campuses in the form of seminars, conferences, and projects all argued as protected by academic freedom.

Nowhere is the misuse of academic freedom more concrete than in the curriculum itself. As an example, this past semester, Yale offered a course titled “Between the Body and the Body-Politic in Palestine.” The course description is a case study in prejudice presented as pedagogy:

“This seminar explores the intimate entanglements between the body and the body-politic in Palestine, examining how bodies are produced, disciplined, injured, and mobilized within settler-colonial structures of occupation and violence...the course interrogates concepts such as necropolitics, biopolitics, debility, and resistance to understand how incarceration, restricted mobility, surveillance, and gendered violence shape corporeal life.”

This is not a description of an academic inquiry; it is the summary of a political verdict. The framework of “settler-colonial structures,” “occupation,” and “necropolitics” is not presented as a theory to be tested but as an incontrovertible truth upon which the entire course is built. There is no room for questioning the premise. Students are not being taught how to think, but what to think. They are being trained in the language and application of a specific ideology, not in the critical analysis of a complex geopolitical conflict. This is a profound abuse of the academic

enterprise. True academic freedom would protect a professor's right to research and teach controversial topics with rigor and intellectual honesty, not their “freedom” to run a semester-long political workshop based on unexamined assumptions. This is not a course description. It is a political manifesto formatted as pedagogy.

The distinction between free speech and academic freedom matters enormously. Academic freedom, properly understood, protects a professor's right to follow evidence wherever it leads, to challenge received wisdom, and to explore uncomfortable hypotheses. A course designed to guide students toward specific political conclusions about an ongoing geopolitical conflict – one with profound implications for the safety and dignity of Jewish and Israeli students on campus – fails any serious standard of scholarly rigor and has no legitimate claim to the protections of academic freedom. It also contributes to an environment where Israel-bashing is both common and banal.

Given how universities fail to distinguish academic freedom from free speech, the way forward is not simple. A wrong approach would be to advocate for censorship or create lists of forbidden topics. That would be abandoning academic principles. A better approach would be to advocate that courses, seminars, and projects within the university be judged by their contribution to education and scholarship. It means demanding more focus on academics, and granting less freedom to ideologues of all stripes. Most fundamentally, it means restoring a clear-eyed understanding of what academic freedom actually protects. When academic freedom persists as a cover for the opposite of scholarship – for predetermined conclusions, political recruitment, and the systematic marginalization of Jewish and Israeli voices – it corrodes the university's defining mission to create, preserve and disseminate knowledge. \*

#### — EDWARD H. KAPLAN

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Credit: ZUMA Press Wire via Reuters Connect



by Raphael BenLevi

*The greatest danger of the emerging deal is that it may throw the regime a political and economic lifeline at the very moment when it is most vulnerable.*

The justification for the 40-days of war with Iran, in a large part, turns on the question of whether or not it will achieve a better result than the 2015 Iran deal, known as the JCPOA. If it does, Trump will have vindicated his decade-long position that he could make a better deal. If it doesn't, he will have proven that Obama's cautious and accommodating diplomacy was ultimately wiser and more realistic.

Many of the key details remain unclear but the answer to this question can be assessed by comparing the two situations as they currently stand.

The first critical question is what will become of Iran's enriched uranium. The JCPOA saw Iran relinquish almost its entire stockpile of enriched uranium, essentially resetting the clock. This was the primary achievement of the 2015 deal. In the current deal, Trump is still insisting that Iran relinquish its entire stockpile of what is assessed to be the 440 kg of 60% enriched material. But what of the other 9 tons of 20% and 5% enriched uranium? This remains unclear.

One of the major flaws of the JCPOA was that it allowed Iran's hitherto illicit industrial scale enrichment infrastructure to remain largely intact, while the limitations placed on its use were to expire within a decade, opening the way for Iran to return to its pursuit of a bomb. Today, this infrastructure has been rendered unusable by Israel and America's strikes. To make a deal better than the JCPOA, Trump would have to include a mechanism to prevent Iran from rebuilding these capabilities. It would have to include not only an Iranian commitment but also an enforcement mechanism to ensure "zero enrichment" indefinitely.

Then there are the issues that the JCPOA largely ignored altogether: missiles, drones, and regional aggression through proxies. So far, there are no indications that missile and drone limitations are central to the current discussions. Nor is there clarity regarding Hezbollah or Iran's wider proxy network. To the contrary, there is talk of linking a deal to a ceasefire in Lebanon which would constrain Israel's freedom of action against Hezbollah. These questions are not peripheral. For Israel and increasingly for the Gulf states, they are no less central than the nuclear issue.

The sanctions issue may prove even more consequential. One of the defining failures of the JCPOA was that sanctions relief provided Tehran with enormous financial breathing room that ultimately helped fund its regional proxies and military expansion. The same danger exists today. Everything depends on the scope and

timing of sanctions relief. Does Washington release frozen Iranian funds? Does it ease oil sanctions? Does Tehran regain access to international financial systems while offering only promises of future compliance?

And here lies the biggest difference between now and 2015. Back then, the Iranian regime entered negotiations from a position of relative strength and regional expansion. Today it faces profound internal weakness. A majority of the population no longer supports the regime and it is under unprecedented economic pressure. The greatest danger of the emerging deal is therefore not merely that it fails to permanently dismantle Iran's nuclear ambitions, or even that it grants it a free hand in its non-nuclear threats, but that it throws the regime a political and economic life jacket at the very moment when it is most vulnerable. And as long as the regime survives in its current form, the fundamental threat to Israel and the Gulf remains intact.

The emerging memorandum reportedly focuses first on reopening the strait and only afterward on broader negotiations over the nuclear issue. This sequencing is understandable given the disruption to global energy markets. But the question remains whether such a deal is even capable of restoring shipping to what it was in February 2026. It is highly unlikely that Iran will actually agree to restore genuine freedom of navigation. Rather it will likely assert that it maintains the authority to regulate or periodically disrupt one of the world's most vital waterways. Gulf states and global shipping markets are unlikely to fully trust any arrangement that leaves Tehran with the demonstrated ability to close the strait at will.

We are approaching the critical decision and two scenarios emerge. In the first, a memorandum is signed that partially reopens the strait, Washington enters prolonged nuclear talks, and Iran remains fundamentally intransigent on the nuclear issue while benefiting from renewed exports and some sanctions relief. Tehran retains its ability to threaten Gulf shipping, Gulf Arab states drift toward accommodation

with Iran out of economic necessity, and Israel finds itself constrained to an unsatisfactory status quo in Lebanon while Hezbollah recovers. Negotiations drag on through repeated extensions without resolution, as the cost of returning to military pressure steadily rises. The regime re consolidates control domestically, rebuilds missile production, and the perception of American weakness radiates outward — not only across the Middle East, but into East Asia as well.

The alternative is that the United States maintains or even intensifies pressure on the regime, concludes that durable freedom of navigation in Hormuz cannot coexist with Tehran's current capabilities, and ultimately determines that force is the least bad option available. Such a strategy would not merely reopen the strait; it could fundamentally alter the balance of power in the Middle East by accelerating the collapse or transformation of the Iranian regime itself.

Under such conditions, Israel could resume decisive operations against Hezbollah, potentially reshaping the strategic reality in Lebanon as well. More broadly, a successful dismantling of the Iranian threat would dramatically strengthen American deterrence globally and cement Donald Trump's legacy as the president who ended the Islamic Republic's decades-long campaign of regional destabilization.

The coming weeks may determine whether the current crisis becomes the beginning of a genuine strategic transformation — or merely another pause that allows Iran to survive, recover, and threaten the region once again. \*

#### — RAPHAEL BENLEVI

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# ACHIEVING A COMPLETE VICTORY IN IRAN

Credit: Reuters



by Michael Gfoeller

The Iran war stands at a pivotal and perilous juncture. What originated as Israel's preemptive strikes during the Twelve-Day War in June 2025 has evolved into a sustained joint U.S.-Israeli campaign that began anew on February 28, 2026. This conflict has decisively altered the balance of power across the Middle East. The Islamic Republic of Iran, once a menacing regional superpower armed with an ambitious nuclear program and a web of clients and proxies, now confronts total conventional military defeat. The United States and Israel have dismantled the regime's most potent military assets while incurring astonishingly low costs. Israel's civilian and military infrastructure remains intact, the U.S. has absorbed only minimal casualties, and America's Arab partners in the Gulf have weathered intense Iranian retaliation with remarkable resilience. By every objective military standard, Iran has lost the war to date. Yet the conflict is not over. Tehran's surviving leadership — hardened ideologues who have ruled through terror for decades — refuse to capitulate. The regime

could still inflict catastrophic regional damage through asymmetric tactics. The Trump Administration's current approach of a naval blockade paired with intermittent negotiations is effective but dangerously incomplete. It grants Iran time to prepare potentially devastating countermeasures. Washington must now escalate pressure through renewed military strikes while insisting on nothing less than the unconditional surrender of the Islamic Republic.

The scale of Iran's military collapse is staggering. In the opening phase of the conflict and the operations that followed, Iranian forces were systematically neutralized. The regime's navy, long a threat to Gulf shipping lanes, has been reduced to a handful of small, fast combat craft capable only of hit-and-run operations in coastal waters. Nearly every major surface vessel and submarine has been sunk or rendered inoperable by U.S. and Israeli strikes. Iran's once-formidable air defense network — comprising Russian-supplied S-300 and S-400 systems alongside indigenous platforms — has been almost entirely obliterated. Radar sites, command centers, and missile batteries that once blanketed the country now lie in ruins, leaving Iranian airspace wide open to U.S. and Israeli aircraft. Ballistic and cruise missile inventories have been halved, with launchers,

storage facilities, and production lines targeted in relentless waves of attacks. These losses have stripped Iran of its primary means of long-range retaliation and deterrence.

Most devastating of all has been the destruction of the nuclear program. Facilities at Fordow, Natanz, Arak, and Isfahan — critical hubs for uranium and plutonium enrichment and weapons research — were subjected to repeated, high-yield precision strikes that penetrated even the deepest underground bunkers. Centrifuge cascades were pulverized, research laboratories reduced to rubble, and stockpiles of enriched uranium either destroyed or rendered inaccessible. The setback is generational. Iran's dream of a nuclear weapon, pursued in defiance of international norms for over two decades, has been shattered. What remains is a hollowed-out infrastructure that would require years, if not a decade, to rebuild under the most favorable conditions. None of this came at a high price for the victors. Israeli cities and bases absorbed only scattered, largely intercepted strikes. Advanced multi-layered missile defenses — augmented by U.S. naval assets in the eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf — performed flawlessly. American forces, operating from carriers, bases in the region, and long-range bombers, suffered negligible losses. Even the Gulf monarchies, despite absorbing the brunt of Iranian missile and drone barrages aimed at oil infrastructure and population centers, emerged largely unscathed. Desalination plants continued functioning, energy exports flowed with minimal disruption, and civilian casualties remained low thanks to rapid evacuations and robust allied air cover. This asymmetry reveals a fundamental truth: Iran's conventional military has been routed. Its much-vaunted "axis of resistance" — proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria — has been degraded, intimidated, and isolated. The regional imperium Tehran spent 47 years constructing from Herat to the Mediterranean now lies in ruins.

Faced with this reality, the Trump Administration could have chosen a path of total economic devastation. Precision strikes on electric power plants, bridges, rail lines, and oil

and gas infrastructure would have brought Iran's economy to its knees within weeks, triggering widespread blackouts, supply chain collapse, and humanitarian crisis. Such measures, while militarily feasible, carried unnecessary risks of long-term regional instability and civilian suffering that could complicate postwar reconstruction. Instead, the Administration adopted a wiser, more surgical strategy: sparing Iran's domestic economic infrastructure while imposing a comprehensive naval blockade that has severed the regime's oil and gas export lifeline. U.S. Navy and allied vessels now patrol the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz and Iranian ports with overwhelming force. Every tanker seeking to load crude or refined products is intercepted, diverted, or boarded. The strategic effect has been speedy and devastating. Storage tanks on Kharg Island — the heart of Iran's export infrastructure — and at lesser terminals will soon be filled to capacity. Crude continues to flow from the wells, but with no outlet for export, production must soon be curtailed, or catastrophic overflows, pipeline ruptures, and uncontrolled fires could occur. As of this writing, Iran stands days or at most weeks from the point at which it will be forced to shut down large segments of its oil output. Revenues that once funded the IRGC, subsidized food imports, and paid for proxy wars have evaporated. The regime's ability to maintain patronage networks and military readiness is crumbling under the weight of this silent, relentless pressure.

At the same time, the Administration has wisely kept diplomatic channels open. Indirect talks, conducted through intermediaries in Oman, Qatar, and elsewhere, signal that a negotiated exit from the war remains possible for what is left of the Iranian leadership. Yet the two sides remain far apart. Washington's central, non-negotiable demand is a complete, verifiable, and irreversible end to Iran's nuclear program — including the physical dismantling of remaining enrichment sites, the removal of all fissile material, and the imposition of intrusive, permanent international inspections.

Tehran, even in its weakened state, refuses to yield on this central issue. Hardliners within the Supreme National Security Council and the IRGC view any concession as tantamount to regime suicide. They calculate, perhaps correctly in the short term, that economic pain alone may not fracture their political control.

This intransigence flows directly from the character of those who still rule Iran. The men directing policy today are not diplomats or reformers; they are veterans of a revolutionary system built on violence. Their specialty is the ruthless application of force to maintain and expand power. They have shown no hesitation in turning shotguns on peaceful protesters, deliberately aiming to blind and disfigure young demonstrators in the streets of Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. As recently as January 2026, the regime is credibly reported to have massacred more than 40,000 of its own citizens who took to the streets demanding political change, an end to corruption, and relief from economic misery. These killings were not aberrations; they were longstanding policy. The IRGC and Basij paramilitary forces — hundreds of thousands strong — execute such orders with chilling efficiency. These men and their supporters understand that surrender would mean more than the loss of power. It would expose them to the legitimate vengeance of the families and friends of their victims in any future democratic Iran. A new order would hold them accountable for decades of oppression, terrorism sponsorship, and domestic slaughter. Consequently, they are prepared to do anything—literally anything—to cling to survival.

This survivalist mindset explains why Iran could once again turn to its historic doctrine of asymmetric warfare. For 47 years, the Islamic Republic has compensated for conventional weakness by cultivating a vast network of client states and terrorist proxies stretching from Herat in Afghanistan to the Mediterranean shores of Lebanon and Syria. Hezbollah, the Houthis, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and Syrian militias served as forward-deployed

instruments of Tehran's will. That network is now fractured, but the underlying strategy endures. Two desperate measures immediately present themselves. First, Iran retains enough surviving missiles and drones to target the massive desalination plants that supply the vast majority of drinking water to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and other Gulf states. These facilities are fragile, expensive, and difficult to defend. A concentrated barrage could contaminate or destroy critical infrastructure, triggering rapid state collapse, mass refugee flows, and a humanitarian disaster that would dwarf anything seen in the region to date. Second, while the destruction of Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan has almost certainly eliminated Iran's capacity to design and fabricate functional nuclear warheads in the near term, the regime likely still possesses significant quantities of uranium enriched to 60 percent — well beyond the level needed for radiological dispersion devices, or “dirty bombs.” These weapons, which spread radioactive contamination through conventional explosives rather than fission, could be mated to remaining delivery systems or smuggled via proxies. The resulting panic, environmental damage, and long-term health crisis would serve Tehran's purpose: to impose costs so severe that the U.S. and its allies hesitate to press for the regime's total defeat.

The principal danger of the Administration's current policy of calibrated negotiations alongside the blockade is precisely that it provides the regime with the one commodity it needs most: time. Every additional week allows surviving IRGC commanders to disperse missile stocks into hardened caves and civilian areas, reposition leadership into deep bunkers, and coordinate final asymmetric strikes with whatever proxy cells remain operational. While the blockade's economic pressure is immense and could eventually fracture the regime's cohesion, this outcome is far from inevitable. The ruthless leaders who dominate decision-making today have survived sanctions and isolation before. They are ideologically conditioned to view compromise as betrayal and chaos as an opportunity.

The United States would therefore be well advised to alter its current strategy before Iran can execute these desperate measures. The naval blockade should continue at full strength — it remains the most elegant and effective tool for economic coercion without unnecessary collateral damage. But it must be paired immediately with a resumption of the intensive, large-scale bombing of military and political targets inside Iran. Strikes should focus first on the remnants of Iran's missile and drone forces, command-and-control nodes, and production facilities. Simultaneously, the campaign must target the physical elimination of the regime's surviving senior leadership wherever reliable intelligence locates them. IRGC and Basij formations — responsible for both external aggression and the brutal suppression of internal dissent — must be systematically eliminated. Particular attention should be paid to the Popular Mobilization militias that Tehran has imported from Iraq to reinforce its domestic control; these foreign fighters represent a direct threat to any future stable order inside Iran. Such operations would not constitute reckless escalation. They would represent the logical continuation of a war that Iran initiated and has already lost on the conventional battlefield.

In any future negotiations, the U.S. position must be simplified and hardened to demand the unconditional surrender of the Islamic Republic. This means not only the verified end of the nuclear program but the cessation of all support for terrorist organizations, the release of all political prisoners, and the acceptance of international oversight sufficient to guarantee that neither the nuclear program nor the apparatus of domestic terror can ever be reconstituted. Anything less would be far too risky for American interests and the security of the region. Any partial deal that leaves the current leadership in place would merely postpone the next crisis, allowing Iran to regroup, rebuild covertly, and strike again when the moment seems favorable.

The current stage of the Iran war illustrates both the extraordinary effectiveness of American and Israeli military power and the enduring dangers posed by a cornered revolutionary regime. Iran's conventional defeat is complete and irreversible. Its economic isolation tightens hourly under the weight of the blockade. Yet the ideological DNA of the Islamic Republic — forged in violence, sustained by terror, and animated by a refusal to accept defeat — means that half-measures will not suffice. The Trump Administration possesses both the capability and the strategic clarity to finish what it has started. By combining relentless pressure on the battlefield with an uncompromising diplomatic posture, Washington can translate tactical victories into a lasting strategic success: the permanent neutralization of the Islamic Republic's nuclear threat, the dismantling of its terrorist network, and the opening of a path toward a more stable and prosperous Middle East. The alternative — prolonged negotiations that grant the regime breathing room to prepare asymmetric horrors — is an invitation to far greater tragedy. History will record whether the United States seizes this decisive moment or allows it to slip away. The stakes could not be higher. \*

#### — MICHAEL GFOELLER

Ambassador Michael Gfoeller served as the political advisor to General David Petraeus at US Central Command. Following government service, he has consulted for leading American companies and written on a variety of scholarly topics. He is the author of “Consciousness Is Curvature: Essays on the Geometry of Thought” (Academica Press, 2025) and the forthcoming book, “Faster Than Light,” which explores how recent advances in theoretical physics can enable feasible interstellar travel, inaugurating a new Age of Exploration.



# HOW AMERICA CAN HELP RESCUE UKRAINIAN CHILDREN

Credit: Douliery Olivier/ABACA  
via Reuters Connect



by *Katya Pavlevych*

**T**he abduction of Ukrainian children has become one of the most horrific aspects of Russia's war against Ukraine. Both Congress and the administration have unequivocally condemned this crime and are working to bring the 20,000 stolen children home. Yet the U.S. Treasury Department's most recent easing of sanctions on Russian oil may undermine the good work done on the issue by Congress and First Lady Melania Trump.

On April 23, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., witnessed a heartbreaking scene: a massive installation of 20,000 teddy bears, each one representing a known Ukrainian child abducted by Russia, spelled out, "Putin abducted 20,000 Ukrainian children. Bring kids back."

My organization, Razom for Ukraine, chose the location deliberately. We wanted America's decision-makers to see and feel the presence of these stolen children as they shape U.S. policy toward Russia and Ukraine.

That display came at a moment when Washington is sending dangerously mixed signals. On one hand, First Lady Melania Trump has been personally engaged in efforts to return abducted Ukrainian children, with Congress and the State Department funding

rehabilitation efforts. On the other hand, the Treasury Department has eased pressure on Russia's energy sector by waiving sanctions and temporarily permitting the sale of Russian oil – again.

These two issues may seem unrelated, but in reality, they are interconnected.

Recent findings by Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab confirm that Russian energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft have been involved in the illegal transfer and "re-education" of Ukrainian children. Researchers identified at least 2,158 children who were taken to six camps owned or supported by these Russian energy companies or their subsidiaries. That number is only the tip of the iceberg. Their role goes much further.

Russia's system of child abduction and indoctrination is funded by Russia's federal budget and the oil and gas industries are the top contributors to it. In 2026, the Kremlin allocated more than \$1 billion in federal funding for its so-called "youth policy." Compared with pre-invasion spending, the 2026 budget is 80% higher and reflects the Kremlin's priorities.

A large portion of the "youth policy" budget goes to paramilitary and "patriotic" organizations that brainwash and militarize Russian, and now Ukrainian, kids. Investigators have found that 388,000 Ukrainian children under Russian occupation have already been enrolled in Yunarmiya (Youth-Army) and the Movement of the First, which are notorious

state-backed youth organizations sanctioned by the United States and Europe.

Russia intentionally steals Ukrainian children and is attempting to turn Ukrainian boys and girls into loyal subjects – and eventually soldiers – of the Russian regime.

Ukraine has been fighting to bring its children home. More than 2,000 children have been returned. First Lady Melania Trump has gotten involved. She has a direct line of communication to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Her quiet but persistent work has led to the release of 26 Ukrainian children, some of whom were kidnapped before age five and spent years separated from their mothers.

Melania's efforts send a clear message to the Kremlin and to the world: America stands with Ukraine's abducted children, and we are committed to their safe return.

That kind of diplomacy demands a coordinated approach and strong political leverage.

But while the First Lady has been engaged in high-stakes negotiations with one of the world's most ruthless dictators, the Treasury Department has given him breathing room by easing sanctions on Russia's most profitable industry.

With oil prices surging amid the war with Iran, lifting pressure on Russian oil helps Moscow make an estimated additional \$150 million per day – or roughly \$4.5 billion per month. The United States cannot simultaneously save children and indirectly enable a system that kidnaps them.

No matter how hard Mrs. Trump works, her efforts will be undermined if the Kremlin remains financially capable of continuing its kidnapping campaign. Putin will continue to treat child returns as a bargaining chip.

US policy toward Russia and Ukraine must be coordinated, consistent, and rooted in strength.

If we stand with abducted children, US policy must pressure the Kremlin in every conversation to return the kids, cut off Putin's ability to abduct and indoctrinate more children,

and give the First Lady the leverage she needs to negotiate from a position of strength.

On May 18, the Treasury waived the sanctions on Russian crude oil again. If the Treasury continues to pursue this policy, Russia is estimated to earn \$36 billion or 2.1% of its GDP by the end of 2026. This will not only allow Moscow to steal more children, but will also enable the Kremlin to continue bombing Ukraine and terrorizing those children who managed to escape the Russian captivity and returned to Ukraine. The United States should restore full pressure on Russia's energy sector and target the companies involved in the abduction and re-education of Ukrainian children.

Washington has to answer a simple question: whose side are we on? The answer should be just as simple. We are on the side of the children. And our policy should prove it. \*

#### **KATYA PAVLEVYCH**

Katya Pavlevych is an advisor on children's issues at Razom for Ukraine. Her op-ed has been adapted from Congressional testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

# WHY RUSSIA MUST LOSE: WHAT IS AT STAKE IN UKRAINE



Credit: Reuters



by Vasil Sikharulidze

Russia's war against Ukraine is not only a brutal violation of sovereignty; it is a direct challenge to the fundamental principle that borders cannot be changed by force. This norm is not abstract; rather, it is the foundation of international stability. If it erodes, the consequences will extend far beyond Ukraine, undermining the security architecture of Europe and encouraging revisionist behavior globally.

For this reason, Russia cannot—and should not—win this war.

The argument is strategic rather than punitive. A Russian victory, or even an ambiguous outcome that can be framed domestically as success, would validate military coercion as an acceptable tool of territorial revision. It would weaken deterrence and embolden further aggression. Conversely, a clear Russian failure would reinforce the credibility of international norms and demonstrate that sustained aggression carries decisive costs.

There is also a historical dimension that is often underappreciated. As S. Frederick Starr argues in “Putin’s Last Rodeo and Beyond,” Russia’s major military defeats have frequently served as catalysts for internal reform. The Crimean War of 1853–1856 exposed deep structural weaknesses in the Russian Empire and led to the “Great Reforms” under Alexander II, including the abolition of serfdom and the modernization of state institutions. Similarly, the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905

triggered constitutional changes and the establishment of a representative assembly. These episodes suggest a recurring pattern: external failure has often compelled Russia to shift from imperial expansion toward internal modernization.

At the same time, history offers an equally important caution. When Russia’s defeat has been incomplete—and when external actors have hoped that accommodation or premature normalization would empower reformist forces—the result has often been renewed aggression rather than lasting change. Hopefully, this pattern will not repeat itself.

The post-Cold War period illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. In the 1990s, insufficient attention to Russia’s use of force in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh coincided with expectations that Moscow was on a genuine reform trajectory. This assumption shaped a cautious policy approach that underestimated the long-term implications of early coercive actions.

In the following decades, similar patterns emerged. The limited response to the war in Chechnya in the early 2000s coincided with the consolidation of authoritarian governance under Vladimir Putin. The restrained reaction to Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, followed by the insufficient deterrence after the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, reinforced the perception that force could be employed with manageable consequences. These cumulative signals contributed to the conditions that enabled the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—the largest war in Europe since World War II.

Georgia today provides a sobering illustration of the long-term consequences of sustained pressure. Once regarded as a leading pro-Western reformer, the country has been subjected to prolonged hybrid influence—political, economic, and informational—which has gradually weakened institutions and constrained its international agency. This demonstrates that Russian strategy operates across a spectrum of tools, not only through conventional military force but also through mechanisms designed to erode sovereignty from within.

This experience reinforces a broader conclusion: unless Russia’s capacity for external coercion is decisively constrained, instability will continue to extend beyond its borders. Military aggression and hybrid influence are integral components of a single strategic approach.

A related policy lesson concerns the limitations of Russia-centric approaches. Efforts to prioritize engagement with Moscow at the expense of neighboring democracies have not produced sustainable stability. In 1991, for example, U.S. policy initially reflected concerns that the dissolution of the Soviet Union might undermine democratic prospects in Russia. As it turned out, the failure of the coup and the independence of fourteen states created a far broader space for democratic development—many of those countries today are significantly freer than Russia itself. Similarly, the 2009 “reset” policy, which downplayed Russia’s occupation of Georgian territories in the interest of broader cooperation, did not moderate Russian behavior in the long term. These experiences suggest that supporting sovereignty, democratic governance, and a rules-based order along Russia’s periphery is not only normatively justified but strategically effective. Such an approach contributes to a more stable Europe and, over time, may create more favorable conditions for change within Russia itself.

For these reasons, any settlement of the war in Ukraine must be approached with patience and strategic clarity. Partial or ambiguous outcomes risk reproducing past mistakes. By contrast, a clear and comprehensive failure of Russia’s war effort offers the strongest basis for both internal reassessment within Russia and durable security in Europe.

Equally important is the continued support for democratic transformation in countries on Russia’s borders. Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and others have demonstrated a clear commitment to sovereignty and democratic development, often under significant pressure. Their success is central to long-term regional stability.

Finally, it is essential to avoid any return to the concept of spheres of influence in Europe. The notion that great powers can determine the fate of smaller states has repeatedly led to instability and conflict. Any revival of such thinking would carry significant risks.

In this context, the continued enlargement of NATO and the European Union remains a cornerstone of European security. Enlargement extends the space of predictable governance, collective defense, and rule-based cooperation. It is not a source of instability but a mechanism for preventing it.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will shape not only European security but the future of the international order. Ensuring that Russia’s aggression fails decisively is therefore not a regional concern alone—it is a matter of global consequence. It serves the long-term interests of the United States and the wider free world by reaffirming the principle that borders cannot be changed by force, strengthening the credibility of deterrence, and preserving a rules-based system that has underpinned decades of relative stability and prosperity. At the same time, it creates the conditions for a potential reorientation within Russia itself, away from coercive imperial ambition and toward internal renewal. In this sense, Ukraine’s victory is not only about defending sovereignty; it is about safeguarding the strategic foundations of a more secure, stable, and free world. \*

#### — VASIL SIKHARULIDZE

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# CHINA VS TAIWAN: THE GEOGRAPHY OF AN UNFINISHED WAR



Credit: Reuters



by Raghu Kondori

Why the Taiwan Strait is not only a political dispute, but a structural fault line in the Indo-Pacific balance of power

The conflict between China and Taiwan is often presented through the language of crisis: military exercises, elections, speeches, sanctions, visits, and diplomatic warnings. But the real importance of Taiwan does not come from any single event. It comes from geography, energy, technology, ideology, and the long-term architecture of power in the Indo-Pacific.

Taiwan is not simply an island claimed by Beijing. It is a strategic hinge between the East China Sea and the South China Sea, positioned near Japan, the Philippines, and the major sea lanes that connect Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East. Whoever controls Taiwan does not merely gain territory. It gains leverage over the maritime order of East Asia.

This is why Taiwan cannot be understood only as a sovereignty dispute. It is a test of whether the Indo-Pacific remains a plural maritime system, or whether it becomes a China-centered security sphere.

For Beijing, Taiwan is the unfinished chapter of the Chinese civil war and the symbolic wound of national division. But it is also a military-geographic problem. As long as Taiwan remains outside the control of the People's Republic of China, China's navy faces a barrier along the first

island chain. Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines form a maritime arc that limits China's free access to the wider Pacific. If Taiwan fell under Beijing's control, that barrier would be broken.

For Taiwan, geography is both shield and vulnerability. The sea protects it from easy invasion, but the same sea makes it dependent on trade, shipping, imported energy, and open maritime routes. As noted in a recent analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Taiwan's island status and dependence on maritime supply chains make blockade scenarios strategically dangerous even without a direct invasion.

Energy remains one of Taiwan's deepest structural vulnerabilities. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Taiwan relies heavily on imported LNG and coal for electricity generation, making maritime security inseparable from energy security. This dependence means that any prolonged disruption in shipping lanes could rapidly become an economic and social crisis.

This is why a Taiwan crisis would not necessarily begin with amphibious landings or missile strikes. It could begin with pressure: inspection zones, cyberattacks, port disruption, gray-zone naval operations, airspace intimidation, or partial maritime restrictions. The objective would not necessarily be immediate conquest, but psychological exhaustion and economic destabilization.

Taiwan's other structural importance lies in technology. The island sits at the center of the advanced semiconductor ecosystem. This

gives Taiwan extraordinary global relevance, but also creates strategic danger. Its chip industry acts simultaneously as shield and magnet. The world depends on Taiwan's semiconductor production, yet that very dependency increases the island's geopolitical weight. Advanced chips are no longer merely commercial products; they have become instruments of industrial power, military modernization, and artificial intelligence competition.

The Taiwan Strait is therefore not only a military frontier. It is the meeting point of three systems: China's continental authoritarian model, Taiwan's democratic maritime model, and America's alliance-based Indo-Pacific order.

This is why the conflict is so difficult to resolve. Beijing sees Taiwan's democratic existence as an ideological contradiction. Taiwan demonstrates that a modern Chinese society can exist outside Communist Party rule. That reality carries ideological implications far beyond military calculations. Taiwan is not only disputed territory; it is a political counter-model.

The United States, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and other regional actors do not view Taiwan only through moral language or democratic solidarity. They view it through balance-of-power logic. If China absorbed Taiwan, the military geography of Asia would change dramatically. Japan's southern flank would become more exposed. The Philippines would face greater Chinese naval pressure to its north. The credibility of American alliances across the Indo-Pacific would weaken. The first island chain would effectively fracture.

History also shapes the conflict. Taiwan's strategic importance did not begin in the twenty-first century. Imperial Japan understood the island's military value long before the emergence of the current U.S.-China rivalry. During the Cold War, Taiwan became part of the broader containment architecture designed to limit Communist expansion in maritime Asia. Today, the island once again sits at the center of a larger geopolitical transition.

The future may follow several trajectories. One scenario is managed tension: China continues pressure operations while Taiwan strengthens resilience and the United States maintains deterrence without direct war. A second scenario is coercive strangulation: Beijing avoids invasion but intensifies cyber pressure, maritime disruption, economic punishment, and gray-zone tactics. A third scenario is open military conflict through blockade, missile escalation, or attempted invasion. The most dangerous possibility may not be deliberate war, but miscalculation between increasingly militarized actors operating in close proximity.

Taiwan's future will not be decided only by speeches, elections, or diplomatic symbolism. It will be shaped by ports, energy reserves, naval logistics, semiconductor supply chains, alliance credibility, and the political resilience of a democratic society under sustained pressure.

In this sense, China vs Taiwan is not a temporary geopolitical crisis. It is one of the defining structural contests of the twenty-first century: a struggle between continental control and maritime openness, between ideological absorption and democratic continuity, between coercive unification and strategic pluralism.

Taiwan matters because it is small enough to be threatened, but important enough to reshape the global balance of power. \*

#### RAGHU KONDORI

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# WHERE IS HUNGARY'S NEW GOVERNMENT HEADED IN THE POST-ORBAN ERA?

Credit: Reuters



by Viktor Marsai

The new Hungarian Tisza government promises to adhere to the strict immigration policies of recent years. But what does the European Union have to say, since it imposed a heavy fine on Hungary for precisely those policies? And what can foreign workers expect, given that – according to preliminary statements – the new administration would significantly restrict their entry? The main dilemma now is how to turn political promises into reality amid the constraints of EU law, economic pressures, and domestic political expectations.

Many in Hungary believe that the European migration crisis is a “fabrication” or a “political construct” invented by the former Fidesz-KDNP government solely to keep people in a state of fear. While others may not put it quite so bluntly, the author himself participated in numerous private and public discussions where people were critical about why there is still so much talk about migration rather than education or healthcare.

Yet the issue of migration is so significant that it determines the outcome of elections on both sides of the Atlantic where a host of politicians turned it into a campaign issue, whether advocating for a more permissive or a more restrictive approach to immigration.

The world is on the move: according to a major comprehensive study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), while in 1970, 84 million people – roughly 2.3% of the world’s population – lived permanently outside their country of birth, by 2024 this figure had risen to 3.7%, exceeding 304 million. All of this is closely linked to trends of globalization, intercontinental travel becoming increasingly easy and cheap, as well as cross-border employment and education. And that leaves aside the billions of people migrating between rural and urban areas within the same country.

Forced migration is also reaching record levels. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics, 123.2 million people – one in every 67 – were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in other parts of their country or across borders by the end of 2024, representing an increase of nearly 100% over the past decade. Given the erosion of the rule-based international system,

which goes hand in hand with the spread of armed conflicts and a decline in funding for humanitarian crises, this trend is likely to continue in the future.

People in Hungary have been largely unaffected by the trend. The Fidesz government became a victim of its own objectives (or, viewed from another angle, success): as a result of its draconian measures, the majority of society has not faced the challenges posed by large-scale, predominantly irregular migration since 2015-16 and, to a lesser extent, the initial phase of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in spring and summer 2022. Many believe that calm is a natural state of affairs rather than the result of policy measures.

It is a mistake to assume that in a globalized world, in an era of large-scale migration, the situation will automatically remain unchanged. In Portugal, a country with an area and population similar to Hungary, 123,000 people – 1.3% of the population – were of foreign origin in the early 1990s, a figure not significantly different from current Hungarian data. As a result of an extremely permissive immigration policy, by 2024 this number exceeded 1.5 million, or 15% of the population. Equally telling is an example from the north. Finland had a mere 49 Somalis living there in 1990. Following the humanitarian resettlement programs of the 1990s (when Somalis fleeing the civil war in their homeland were brought in from refugee camps in Kenya) and family reunifications that generated chain migration, the Somali population now exceeds 28,000 – ranking fourth after Russians, Estonians, and the 31,000 Iraqis who arrived in a manner similar to the Somalis.

All of this is important because conventional wisdom in Hungary frequently holds that “no one wants to come here anyway.” Well, as the examples above show, international migrants do not necessarily end up where they want to go, but rather where they can actually go—and the latter is greatly influenced by government policies. The proportion of the foreign, non-ethnic Hungarian population in Hungary by 2040 will largely depend on government policies.

Migration and asylum issues will stay with us for decades to come, and policy remains a strong determinant of how they are resolved. It is therefore crucial to understand what government policies can be expected in these areas from the new Hungarian government; what external and internal challenges the Tisza government will face; and what possible responses may arise in this context. From the Hungarian side, available documents such as the Tisza Party’s election program, ministerial hearings, and statements by government politicians provide guidance in our search for answers; on the external front, official EU regulations and other materials may serve as reference points.

This article does not aim to be exhaustive; for example, it does not address in detail the issues of international students, the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship program, or the local management of the migration crisis. In many cases, it raises questions rather than offering recommendations—in the hope that this will foster professional debate on the issues of immigration and asylum.

#### POSITIONING AND OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Discourse on migration and asylum by now points far beyond policy frameworks and has in many respects become a matter of ideology and worldview – not only in Hungary, but also in other countries across Europe and the world. Although colloquial and political discourse generally uses the terms “pro-immigration” and “anti-immigration,” these are much more labels deployed in political communication than descriptions of actual attitudes. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of “more permissive” or “critical” positions regarding immigration.

Based on Tisza’s election manifesto and the statements made by its politicians, the party’s markedly anti-immigration stance is clear, and on certain points it even exceeds the positions of Fidesz-KDNP. According to the manifesto,

Hungary will remain an “immigration-free country,” and “the border fence will remain in place; indeed, we will strengthen the protection of the country and EU borders with additional security measures, and we will not allow illegal immigrants to be resettled in our country from Western Europe.” The election program is critical of the release of convicted foreign human traffickers, the residency bond program (the document refers to this in the present tense, although it ended in 2017), and the admission of guest workers. Regarding the latter, the election manifesto and the government politicians interviewed about it announce a moratorium effective June 1, 2026. At the same time, however, many elements of the document, including the protection of the border fence, addressing the root causes of migration, rejection of the mandatory solidarity mechanism and the Pact on Migration and Asylum in general, align with the previous government’s policies on migration and asylum. Overall, the strict approach to migration policy appears set to remain in place.

Another important question is who will actually be in charge of the various aspects of Hungary’s migration and asylum policy. Migration is a complex phenomenon, and its policy implications are just as complex across the various ministries and government agencies.

This was already evident under the Fidesz-KDNP governments: considering just the last four years, the parties concerned included the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of European Affairs (EUM), the Ministry for National Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, not to mention the Prime Minister’s Office. The Ministry of Defense also became involved in matters related to foreign operations and addressing the root causes of migration.

It is no coincidence that, given the convergence and at times the clash of various perspectives and interests (cf. the recruitment of foreign workers versus strict immigration policies), many came to believe that Hungary has not a single policy but rather a bundle of

policies on immigration. Moreover, all of this was influenced by power struggles and positions within the administration. This, of course, is not unique to Fidesz: ministries in almost every country tend to function as “neighboring castles.” Based on our current knowledge, we can expect something similar with the Tisza government: the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister’s Office (following the dissolution of the EUM), the Ministry of Economics and Energy, the Armed Forces, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Family, and even the newly restructured Ministry of Education (due to foreign students) will be responsible for certain segments of immigration. All of this will require serious coordination among the various actors – all the more so because Gábor Pósfai, the Minister of the Interior who holds one of the most important positions on this issue, comes from the business sector and lacks expertise in migration policy. For now, therefore, it is unclear who will be the Tisza government’s “migration expert,” the person to coordinate these areas across the board and resolve conflicts of interest.

#### **WHAT ABOUT THE GUEST WORKERS? OR PERHAPS NOT GUEST WORKERS AT ALL?**

One of the new government’s most important promises was to ban the issuance of new work permits to foreign guest workers from third countries, effective June 1, until further notice. During his confirmation hearing, Minister of Social and Family Affairs Vilmos Káta-Németh stated that, in order to protect Hungarian workers, he would not allow “economic migrants” into the country. In the absence of a legal definition, the remark can be viewed more as a rhetorical device. At the same time, based on statements so far (the relevant regulation has not yet been published), it is unclear exactly what the Tisza government means on this point and what its objectives are. The only certainty is that the new regulation will apply to third-country nationals, i.e., those who are not citizens of the European Economic Area.

If the decision-makers’ goal is to protect Hungarian workers, then they must consider that a significant portion of the foreign workers visible to the public (delivery drivers, restaurant workers) are not guest workers but student workers who perform these jobs alongside their university studies. Presumably, nor is the ruling party referring to those individuals who work in highly skilled positions under the EU Blue Card program (although they too are economic migrants). The plan most likely applies to job seekers with guest worker residence permits who, according to the election manifesto, drive down wages and cause a significant rise in housing costs. However, conceptual confusion arises once again regarding the “120,000 foreign, mostly Asian guest workers” cited in the document: citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, Belarus, Moldova, the Republic of Montenegro, the Russian Federation, Serbia, and Ukraine are not subject to regulations governing guest workers but may work in Hungary primarily under the so-called National Card program.

Beyond the specific regulations governing the employment of foreign workers, there is also the general theoretical and practical question of the extent to which a given country has actual need for them. Businesses routinely complain about labor shortages, while workers and their labor unions fear that foreign workers will drive down wages and contribute to the erosion of labor protection regulations and opportunities for representation. The author of this article leans toward the latter argument, though it must be noted that the structure of the Hungarian labor market is unique.

All of this implies the need for a thorough examination of whether Hungary still has human resource reserves that can be mobilized, or whether there are indeed sectors where, despite wage increases, positions cannot be filled with Hungarian workers. This is a matter of national economic and strategic importance because the strict regulations of the Hungarian

model do not currently make the country attractive to low-skilled foreign workers in a regional context, while neighboring countries the Czech Republic and Romania are relaxing their labor market regulations further. So, if there is a need for foreign guest workers after all, our country could fall farther behind in the regional and international competition. Expected to take effect on June 1, the promised moratorium will not in itself cause a disaster. However, a decision on the beneficial and appropriate course of action must be made within a relatively short time (a few months, at most half a year).

#### **IRREGULAR IMMIGRATION**

According to the Tisza manifesto, the new government intends to maintain enhanced protection of Hungary’s borders. At the same time, the entry into force of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum on June 12, as well as the European Court of Justice’s rulings in cases C-808/18 and C-123/22 with the resulting daily fine of €1 million (more precisely, its deduction from payments due to Hungary), present the new government with a serious challenge.

A detailed examination of the ten-point Pact is beyond the scope of this article, so we focus on those elements that are going to pose the greatest challenge to the cabinet. First and foremost is the issue of the mandatory solidarity mechanism and quotas. Politicians from the Tisza Party and their election program have repeatedly stressed that our country will not accept asylum seekers, nor does it intend to pay a penalty for failing to do so. The government views the third element of mandatory solidarity – operational and technical support provided to frontline countries (e.g. sending experts) – as the solution. Although we do not yet see how this model would work in practice, in theory it seems like a viable path. Indeed, the author ventures to suggest that a contribution of 20,000 euros per asylum seeker is also an acceptable alternative: considering that a few hundred people would

be allocated to our country under the current distribution framework, this sum amounts to no more than a few million euros.

A far more problematic issue is the provision of the Pact and the Commission establishing the procedure to be followed at the border and the quotas allocated to individual Member States. The key element of the C-808/18 ruling – and the rationale for the million-euro fine – is that the current Hungarian system unduly restricts access to the Hungarian asylum system by stipulating that, as a general rule (with the exception of those arriving from Ukraine), an asylum application can only be lodged if a declaration of intent is first filed at the Hungarian diplomatic mission in Belgrade. (The other two key issues are the inadequacy of legal remedies and the violation of EU return guarantees.) Although the question of why Hungary refuses to budge on this issue came up repeatedly in various discussions, the problem is not quite that simple.

The Pact – and the EU – takes a territorial approach to asylum, meaning that the Court and the Commission expect applications to be accepted at the Hungarian border as well. In other words, Hungary would once again have to allow asylum seekers who reach its borders to lodge their applications there. To put it very simply, anyone who reaches the Hungarian border and claims to be an asylum seeker will be admitted into the country.

At a superficial glance, this will of course not be the case. The Pact decrees that the procedure be split into two tracks following a seven-day preliminary screening. Track one will follow the standard procedure applying to those who are highly likely to be granted international protection. They will be entitled to enter the country and must wait there for the procedure to be completed. In such cases, the system will not have a cap on the numbers. The other track will include applicants whose applications are highly likely to be rejected. They will undergo the so-called “border procedure” that must be completed within twelve weeks. If the process

exceeds this timeframe, with a few exceptions, they too will be entitled to enter the country. However, it is unlikely that the tight three-month period will be sufficient for the procedure including appeals. And even if the procedure is completed and the final decision is rejection, Hungary will be responsible for returning the individual to their country of origin or a transit country – and if this is not carried out, the likely result will be the individual re-entering the country’s territory. As a side note, the same problem arises in connection with the recently adopted legislation which provides a broader interpretation of the concept of safe third countries for member states, a measure voted for in the European Parliament by politicians from both Tisza and Fidesz-KDNP. The EU is redefining the concept in vain if third countries do not cooperate and refuse to take back persons whose asylum application was rejected or are inadmissible.

On May 18, Prime Minister Péter Magyar stated that “they are seeking a solution that would require no payment and result in no migrants.” At the same time, it is unclear how this could be achieved in the current situation. If Hungary wants to comply with current EU asylum regulations – and those set to take effect on June 12 – then it must start building an asylum system in line with the Pact. The Commission will obviously allow time for this – but not indefinitely (and the daily penalty will likely remain in place until then). The two previous transit zones could serve as a suitable starting point for this – but it should be noted that their capacity is roughly 700 people, which the Commission and the Court of Justice considered too low already back in 2020. Furthermore, the Commission’s August 2024 decision set a processing capacity of 7,716 people for Hungary regarding procedures conducted at the border. In the long term – calculated using the 12-week maximum timeframe – this could amount to over 30,000 people annually. It is thus for now unclear how the Tisza government can simultaneously

meet the dual requirements of the EU asylum system and its own strict border control policy. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, although the 27 super-milestones set by the Commission as conditions for accessing funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) do not include the issue of asylum, it is difficult to imagine that Hungary could gain access to these funds without implementing reforms in this area.

Regardless of how the questions are answered, the division of competences in the area of asylum will continue to guarantee disputes and turf wars between Member States and European Union institutions – as we have already seen in recent years. Considering the risk of potential new infringement proceedings – and fines – over EU funds, the daily €1 million fine, and the entry into force of the Pact as new legislation, the EU holds a significant portion of the trump cards. \*

#### — VIKTOR MARSAI

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# REFIGHTING SPAIN'S CONQUEST OF MEXICO

y Para Cuando Pedirán  
Perdón por el Genocidio  
y el Despojo de los  
Pueblos de Anahuac

Pre-Hispanic Dancers In Mexico Protest Against The Visit Of Isabel Díaz Ayuso, Far-right President Of The Community Of Madrid Credit: Gerardo Vieyra via Reuters Connect



by Richard M. Sanders

**D**uring her recent visit to Mexico, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, the fiercely conservative head of Madrid's regional government, paid public homage to Hernán Cortés, the *conquistador* who overthrew the Aztec empire and brought Mexico under Spanish rule by 1521. This provoked a harsh response from Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, who emphasized the accepted view of Cortés within her country that stresses his brutality and gives short shrift to the perspective found on the Spanish right that hails him as a bringer of western civilization and Christianity.

Mexico's former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador had repeatedly demanded apologies from Spain's leaders for its conduct during the colonial period and taken offense when none were forthcoming. Sheinbaum, his successor, initially followed his line, but when conciliatory statements from Spain's foreign minister and king were forthcoming, she expressed satisfaction and let the controversy die down.

Díaz Ayuso likely chose to revive it as a way to strengthen her position within Spain's center-right Partido Popular (People's Party), the largest formation opposing the governing

Socialists, by appealing to voters who may be inclined to support Vox, a new hard right party which has become a force in Spanish politics.

But the question of how Spain's history in Mexico should be viewed transcends this particular dust-up. While in Spain a belief in a pan-Hispanic identity centered on Madrid persists in some quarters, the prevailing ideology in Mexico underscores the country's mixed racial roots and unique culture, while casting Cortés as a villain in an ongoing nationalist drama of resistance to imperialism.

#### A TRIP WITH POLITICAL BAGGAGE

On May 3, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, President of the regional government of Madrid and a major figure in Spain's conservative opposition Partido Popular, began an official visit to Mexico. But while the normal goals of such visits—strengthening trade and tourism—formed part of her agenda, it also had a strong political element.

Having already criticized the leftist governments of López Obrador and Sheinbaum as corrupt, linked to narcotics trafficking, and dictatorial, she made it clear that her trip would also be about forging links with Mexico's conservative opposition National Action Party (Spanish initials PAN) and that it would include a tribute to Cortés which would take

place at Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral. However, after religious authorities decided that this was an inappropriate venue, the tribute was shifted to an events space for Mexico's Basque community.

In her remarks, Díaz Ayuso asserted that Cortés was an "indispensable architect of Mexico's existence" and that the relationship between Spain and Mexico was a "five-century-long story of love" rather than of hate. She condemned the "revisionism" which has demanded that Spain apologize for the excesses of the conquest, which she viewed as a "civilizing" process which resulted in Spanish becoming a "universal language."

Reaction was swift. President Sheinbaum sharply criticized Díaz Ayuso's "ignorance," asserting that those who defend the conquest or Cortés himself are "destined for defeat." She also published a copy of an edict of Spanish King Charles I which, she said, alluded to atrocities committed by Cortés. She went on to say that "the indigenous people are the true reserve of the values of the Mexico of yesterday and today."

Díaz Ayuso had planned also to attend a gala event honoring Ibero-American cinema. However, threats by participants to boycott the event should she appear left her with little choice except to return home early. She did receive some support from members of the PAN who accused Sheinbaum of "intolerance," but generally the party appears to have found her engagement on the issue of Cortés' historical role to be embarrassing.

Back in Spain, the governing Socialists wasted no time in criticizing her for trying to provoke an international incident, claiming that she had subjected herself to ridicule. She defended herself, asserting that Sheinbaum was "attacking Spain" and had tried to "expel" her from Mexico. It remains to be seen whether her Mexican excursion is net plus or minus for her, but in any event, it was consistent with the space which she has been carving out for herself in Spanish political life.

#### POSITIONED ON THE RIGHT

She is a member of the Partido Popular, which governed Spain for two periods following the country's return to democracy—first from 1996 to 2004 under José Maria Aznar and then from 2011 to 2018 under Mariano Rajoy. During both its periods in power it governed from the center-right, committed to rule of law and accepting of Spain's welfare state. However, in recent years Spanish politics has become more polarized. The Partido Popular has faced pressure as a new hard right party, Vox, which had split off from it, has gained prominence.

Vox takes a strong position on social issues, principally immigration and abortion, and celebrates what it sees as the glories of Spain's past such as the victory over the Turks at Lepanto in 1571 and the colonization and Catholic evangelization of the Americas. While remaining within the Partido Popular, Díaz Ayuso is representative of this political style. She has emphasized her Catholic identity; also, she has participated in events associated with the international Trump-adjacent right such as the "Hispanic Prosperity Gala" held at Mar-a-Lago in February.

No stranger to hot rhetoric, she has accused Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of seeking to perpetuate himself in power and send the opposition to prison "like in Nicaragua." She recently condemned his decision to regularize the status of illegal immigrants as leading to the "Islamization" of Spain. She has, however, said that she supports the "ordered" entry of Latin Americans to Spain, as the cultural affinities mean that this is really is "not immigration." (To vocal criticism she suggested that immigrants were required as "someone needs to clean houses.")

Díaz Ayuso's ambitions to play a role on the national stage are evident, and she may one day seek to supplant current Partido Popular leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo who is trying to maintain a balance between the party's right and its more moderate elements. Thus, her decision

to visit Mexico and vindicate the long-dead conquistador seems to have been part of her effort to consolidate a position as leader of the right wing of her political party, positioning it to govern with support from Vox, if necessary, as she had done at one point at the regional level.

The question of Spain's historic role had already become a hot button issue in Spanish-Mexican relations, and inevitably in Spain's internal politics as well. Former Mexican President López Obrador, who claims some indigenous ancestry, had repeatedly demanded that Spain apologize to Mexico's native peoples for the massacres and cultural imposition which the conquest had entailed, including in a 2019 letter to King Felipe VI. The response delivered by Spain's Foreign Ministry rejected the demand, stating that one could not judge the events of five hundred years ago by contemporary standards.

However, with the succession of the combative López Obrador by the less confrontational Sheinbaum, the Spanish government took a softer approach. King Felipe admitted that there had been "much abuse" during the conquest, while Foreign Minister Albares recognized the "pain and injustice" of the colonial period, statements which Sheinbaum accepted as steps towards reconciliation.

However, these gestures were rejected by Spain's conservative opposition. Partido Popular leader Núñez Feijóo dismissed the reexamination of these distant events as "nonsense" while saying that the king had only engaged in a "conversation" rather than having issued a formal declaration on the subject. A senior figure in Vox went further, proclaiming himself to be "stunned" by the apology, defending "the colossal and glorious work of Spain" ... (with) the end of the Muslim presence and the glorious leap across the Atlantic... a civilizing miracle full of generosity, piety, genius (and) service...." Díaz Ayuso, it seems, took Vox's rhetoric with her to Mexico.

### DUELING VISIONS OF HISTORY

But in Mexico Cortés is no hero. His tomb inside a church in Mexico City is seldom visited, while a grand monument to Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec ruler, whose execution Cortés had ordered, has long stood at the intersection of two of the capital's principal arteries. And in a more recent slight López Obrador determined in 2023 that the long body of water which separates Baja California from the rest of Mexico should be exclusively known as the Gulf of California, and not by its alternative name, the Sea of Cortés.

The prevailing Mexican view of Cortés emphasizes the brutality and rapacity of his conquest of the Aztecs, and the overthrow of their distinct culture which had produced Tenochtitlan, the largest city in the pre-Colombian Americas, with its huge temples, as well as the bridges, causeways, canals, and aqueducts that served a population of 200,000. (Cortés razed the city and built Mexico's capital on its site.) And unquestionably the search for gold figured heavily in Cortés' successful effort to conquer the Aztecs by a mixture of guile and force.

Of course, the Aztecs themselves were imperialists, and Cortés' ultimate victory was achieved with the support of neighboring tribes and city states who sought to free themselves from Aztec demands for both tribute and prisoners for human sacrifice. And while the Aztecs have been appropriated as symbols of Mexican greatness in nationalist discourse which began in the nineteenth century and continues today, the impact of Spain on the culture that emerged as a result of the conquest is pervasive—language and literature, law and governance, architecture and religion—all bear the Spanish stamp, although partially refracted through the pre-existing societies which left their own mark.

Díaz Ayuso's homage to Cortés and the reaction to it demonstrated posturing both in Spanish and Mexican politics. She sought to highlight her credentials on the right as a defender of Spain's historic grandeur, while

Sheinbaum led a fervently nationalist Mexican rebuttal. But while this episode has already begun to disappear from the headlines, it highlights the very different ways in which Spain's role in Mexico is viewed on each side of the Atlantic.

Although it has long since abandoned its transatlantic empire, Spain still struggles to produce a coherent historic and political vision of its relations with its former colonies. During the Franco era the ideological construct was "hispanidad," (Spanish-ness) an assertion of a common Madrid-centric identity based on Spanish culture and the Catholic religion. This vision was implemented through cultural and political outreach (and included a certain affinity with authoritarian Latin states such as Perón's Argentina).

With its return to democracy, Spain's approach shifted towards a rhetoric of more equal relations. Successive governments promoted Spain as a bridge between Latin America and Europe, while encouraging Spanish investment in the region. Support for democracy and a vigorous foreign aid program formed part of Spain's policies, as did the creation of annual "Ibero-American" summits. But in the world of the new right wing politics, within which Díaz Ayuso is claiming her place, pride in Spain's history of empire seems to be gaining a new lease on life.

It is likely to be rejected in Mexico where there the emphasis has been historically on its racially mixed ("mestizo") heritage. Ideologues of this vision such as José Vasconcelos in the 1920s suggested that such fusion would lead to the creation of a "cosmic race" which represented the future of mankind. Without going that far, more recent Mexican intellectuals such as Carlos Fuentes have stressed that Mexico is not merely a country, but a distinct civilization with European, indigenous and African roots.

Such views have their skeptics such as one Spanish journalist who, covering the story of Díaz Ayuso's praise of Cortés and the sharp

Mexican reaction, asserted that "except for its food, which is no small thing, Mexico has more of Cortés than Cuauhtémoc." Whatever the degree of truth in that stance, and however profitable revisiting the conquest of the Americas may be in Spain's internal politics, it is unlikely to do it any good in its relations with Mexico. And although Spain's was the first of the great global empires to fall, and was followed later by its British, French and most recently Russian counterparts, this episode demonstrates that the politics of imperial nostalgia never completely fades away. \*

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# BEHIND THE BEIJING SUMMIT: TAIWAN, IRAN, AND A NEW GREAT- POWER DEAL

Credit: Reuters



by Mordechai Chaziza

The meeting between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping can signal a broader geopolitical shift linking Taiwan and Iran within a shared framework of strategic bargaining. Rather than a formal deal, both powers could test indirect forms of restraint, leverage, and de-escalation across interconnected regional theaters.

President Donald Trump's high-stakes meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping focused on trade, tariffs, and the familiar theater of great-power competition. However, the more consequential story may lie elsewhere. Beneath the surface of the summit, Washington and Beijing are quietly testing a broader strategic accommodation, one that implicitly links Taiwan and Iran, two of the world's most volatile geopolitical flashpoints.

That does not necessarily imply a formal quid pro quo. Neither side is likely to frame concessions on Taiwan as the price for Chinese pressure on Iran. However, major-power diplomacy rarely operates through explicit exchanges alone. More often, it develops through tacit understandings, calibrated signals, and reciprocal restraint. The central question, therefore, is not whether Trump and Xi will conclude a grand bargain, but whether they can establish a framework in which moderation in one arena creates room for de-escalation in another.

For President Trump, the appeal of such an arrangement is straightforward. His approach to diplomacy has consistently favored transactional outcomes over institutional process. Tangible achievements matter more than procedural continuity, and foreign-policy success is often measured through visible demonstrations of leverage. If Beijing were persuaded to constrain Tehran, whether through stricter sanctions enforcement, reduced economic support, or greater

political distance from Iran's regional activities, Trump could present this domestically as a significant strategic victory.

At the same time, Washington could reduce pressure elsewhere. Taiwan remains the most sensitive issue in U.S.-China relations, and even limited American signaling there carries the risk of escalation. A modest adjustment in rhetoric, a reduction in military symbolism, or a temporary easing of diplomatic friction could be interpreted in Beijing as evidence of greater American caution regarding Chinese core interests. In that sense, Taiwan and Iran become linked not because they are intrinsically connected, but because each functions as a source of leverage within a broader effort to manage strategic competition.

The logic is attractive for both sides. The United States seeks to contain Iran without becoming trapped in another prolonged Middle Eastern crisis, while simultaneously managing China's rise without confrontation. China, meanwhile, wants stability around Taiwan and continued influence in the Middle East without being drawn into open conflict with Washington. Each power, therefore, possesses assets it seeks to protect and instruments it can employ to shape the other's behavior.

Nevertheless, the apparent symmetry quickly breaks down. For Beijing, Taiwan is not merely another foreign-policy issue. It is tied directly to sovereignty, regime legitimacy, and President Xi's historical legacy. Chinese leaders can negotiate over tariffs, technology restrictions, or maritime tensions; they cannot easily appear flexible on Taiwan without incurring substantial domestic and strategic costs.

Iran occupies a different position in Chinese strategic thinking. Beijing values Tehran as part of a broader anti-hegemonic posture and as an important partner in energy, connectivity, and regional balancing. However, Iran is not foundational to Chinese national identity in

the way Taiwan is. Consequently, China may be prepared to recalibrate aspects of its relationship with Tehran at the margins, though not in ways that resemble abandoning a strategic partner for short-term accommodation with Washington.

This asymmetry is important because it suggests that any emerging understanding would likely remain indirect, incremental, and carefully managed rather than dramatic or explicit. Washington is unlikely to "trade away" Taiwan, just as Beijing is unlikely to "abandon" Iran. More plausibly, both sides could engage in calibrated de-escalation: softer American signaling on Taiwan, accompanied by greater Chinese cooperation in sanctions enforcement, or more restrained diplomatic positioning toward Tehran. Such adjustments would fall short of a grand bargain, yet they could still reshape the broader strategic environment.

The possibility also aligns with President Trump's broader diplomatic style. He has consistently favored personalized, leader-driven negotiations that can be framed as demonstrations of strength. That approach can generate tactical flexibility, but it also carries risks of inconsistency and overreach. In dealing with China, those risks become especially pronounced because Beijing approaches diplomacy through long-term strategic calculation, disciplined signaling, and careful management of escalation.

President Xi, by contrast, is unlikely to view the meeting through the lens of immediate spectacle. From Beijing's perspective, predictability, leverage, and strategic patience matter more than dramatic breakthroughs. If China can avoid a worsening trade confrontation, preserve maneuvering space around Taiwan, and maintain flexibility in the Middle East, that may already constitute a satisfactory outcome. Beijing does not require a historic rapprochement; it requires sufficient stability to prevent strategic encirclement or coercive pressure.

This is why the meeting matters beyond the usual symbolism of summit diplomacy. If Washington and Beijing begin to connect Taiwan and Iran within the same strategic calculus, they may be signaling a return to a more classical form of great-power politics, one in which regional crises are increasingly folded into wider systems of

bargaining and competitive restraint. The Middle East and the Indo-Pacific would no longer function as separate theaters but as interconnected arenas within a broader contest over influence, escalation management, and geopolitical leverage.

Such a shift would carry significant implications for Israel and the wider Middle East. If China assumes a more active role in shaping Iranian behavior, even indirectly, that could influence Tehran's calculations regarding sanctions evasion, nuclear positioning, and proxy activity. At the same time, it could indicate a growing American tendency to interpret Middle Eastern stability through the prism of strategic competition with China. In that scenario, the region would become not merely a localized security arena but also an embedded component of the larger U.S.-China rivalry.

Caution, however, remains essential. There is no public evidence that Trump and Xi have agreed to a formal exchange linking Taiwan and Iran. Still, the strategic logic underpinning such linkage is increasingly difficult to dismiss. The summit may matter less for any explicit agreement than for the implicit message it conveys: that the world's two most powerful states are once again exploring whether pressure in one region can be balanced through restraint in another.

If that is indeed the emerging trajectory, then the significance of the meeting extends well beyond a single diplomatic encounter. It points toward a geopolitical environment in which Taipei, Beijing, Washington, and Tehran become interconnected components of a wider conversation about power, leverage, and strategic limits. In an era defined by renewed great-power rivalry, that may be the summit's most consequential implication.\*

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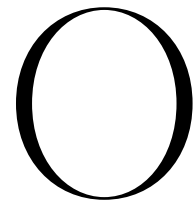


**THE COUNTDOWN  
STARTS NOW: WILL  
2026 MARK AL-  
QAEDA'S STRATEGIC  
BREAKTHROUGH IN  
THE SAHEL?**

Credit: Reuters



by Michael Barak



On April 26, 2026, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in coordination with the Azawad Liberation Front, launched a large-scale offensive against government institutions across several regions in Mali, culminating in the assassination of the country's Minister of Defense. This attack was not an isolated incident. Rather, it reflects the maturation of a long-term strategic plan developed over more than a decade, aimed at transforming Mali into the geopolitical center of gravity of jihadist activity in the Sahel.

The absence of a robust counter-terrorism force, the withdrawal of foreign military contingents, and the region's transformation into an arena for great-power competition have further exacerbated the situation. At the same time, the exploitation of natural resources, deepening humanitarian crises, and persistent governance failures continue to fuel instability. Against this backdrop, jihadist organizations are consolidating their presence and expanding their operational reach.

This raises a central question: does 2026 mark a turning point toward a strategic breakthrough for Al-Qaeda in the Sahel?

#### DEFINING "STRATEGIC VICTORY" IN THE SAHEL

To assess the trajectory accurately, it is essential to clarify what constitutes a "strategic victory" in this context. In the Sahel, such a victory does not necessarily require full territorial control. Rather, it would involve the sustained erosion of state authority across large areas, the establishment of durable jihadist governance structures, the normalization of jihadist actors as de facto political authorities, and the ability to project instability beyond the region. By these criteria, Al-Qaeda has not yet achieved a definitive victory, but it is closer than at any point in the past decade, and the developments of 2026 suggest the region is approaching a critical threshold.

#### THE SAHEL AS A GLOBAL SECURITY ARENA

The Sahel, a semi-arid belt stretching across Africa south of the Sahara, has become the world's most lethal epicenter of terrorism. In

recent years, the scale and intensity of violence have increased dramatically, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger at the forefront of this trend, and with the expansion of attacks into coastal West African states signaling a widening geographic scope of instability.

Beyond the statistics, the strategic importance of the Sahel lies in its broader implications. Its proximity to Europe makes it a critical corridor for migration flows and a potential vector for instability that can directly affect European security environments. At the same time, the decline of jihadist strongholds in the Middle East has shifted the center of gravity of global jihad toward Africa, where operational space is less constrained and governance is weaker. In parallel, the region's natural resources, including gold, minerals, and energy assets, are increasingly embedded in both local conflict dynamics and global economic competition.

As a result, the Sahel can no longer be viewed as a peripheral crisis. It is emerging as a central front in global security, with consequences that extend far beyond the African continent.

#### THE SAHEL THROUGH THE LENS OF GLOBAL JIHADIST ORGANIZATIONS

Global jihadist organizations, particularly Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, perceive the Sahel as an ideal operational environment. Weak governance, systemic corruption, economic hardship, and intercommunal tensions create conditions that facilitate their expansion. These groups are able to exploit vast ungoverned spaces, porous borders, and limited state capacity to entrench themselves across large territories.

At the same time, they have developed adaptive and resilient financial structures. In several areas, jihadist groups control or influence gold mining operations, impose taxation on local populations, and rely on smuggling networks to sustain their activities. Environmental pressures, including climate

change and resource scarcity, further intensify these dynamics by driving displacement, deepening socio-economic grievances, and expanding the pool of potential recruits.

#### MALI AS THE STRATEGIC CORE

Within Al-Qaeda's long-term strategic framework, Mali occupies a central position. Early operational concepts emphasized a gradual approach to establishing a jihadist entity, relying on alliances with local actors and avoiding direct confrontation with populations in order to build legitimacy over time.

This approach has evolved significantly with the creation of JNIM as an umbrella organization, which enabled the consolidation of multiple factions and the strengthening of ties with local ethnic groups, particularly the Tuareg and Fulani. By integrating local leadership, mediating disputes, and providing limited services, the organization has embedded itself deeply within the socio-political fabric of the region.

Over time, JNIM has expanded its operations beyond Mali into neighboring countries, taking advantage of weak governance structures and porous borders to extend its influence across the Sahel and into coastal West Africa.

#### FROM INSURGENCY TO GOVERNANCE

A defining feature of the current phase is JNIM's transition from guerrilla warfare to a more sophisticated strategy centered on governance and territorial influence. Beginning around 2022, the organization shifted toward tactics aimed at isolating urban centers by disrupting transportation routes, restricting access to essential goods such as food and fuel, and targeting critical infrastructure.

The objective is not only to weaken the state militarily, but to undermine its legitimacy and its ability to function. In parallel, JNIM has expanded its role in local governance by mediating disputes, providing services,

and incorporating local populations into its operational structures. This dual approach allows the organization to position itself as an alternative authority rather than merely an armed group.

This evolution reflects a broader transformation in which jihadist organizations are increasingly acting as proto-state entities, capable of sustaining influence over both territory and population.

**ISIS IN THE SAHEL: RIVALRY AND COEXISTENCE**

Alongside Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in the Sahel Province has established a significant presence, particularly in the tri-border region of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. While rivalry between the two organizations persists, particularly in relation to recruitment and resource control, the relationship between them is complex and cannot be reduced to simple competition.

In certain areas, direct confrontation is limited, and both organizations appear to tolerate each other's presence in order to preserve operational capacity against common adversaries. This dynamic raises the possibility that their coexistence may contribute to a more diversified and resilient jihadist ecosystem, rather than leading to mutual weakening.

**COUNTER-TERRORISM EFFORTS: A FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE**

Efforts to counter the growing threat have been largely ineffective. The withdrawal of foreign forces and the end of international stabilization missions created a significant security vacuum that has not been adequately filled. Subsequent attempts by alternative actors to assume this role have produced limited results.

At the regional level, fragmentation remains a major obstacle. Multiple security frameworks operate simultaneously, often without sufficient

coordination or shared strategic direction. This lack of unity undermines the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts and creates opportunities for jihadist groups to exploit institutional gaps and expand their reach.

In addition, non-military initiatives aimed at addressing root causes, including economic development and governance reform, have remained insufficient in scale and have struggled to keep pace with the rapid deterioration of the security environment.

**GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION WITHOUT STRATEGIC COHERENCE**

The Sahel has increasingly become a theater of geopolitical competition, with external actors seeking to advance their interests in the region, particularly in relation to security and natural resources. However, this competition has not translated into effective stabilization.

France's influence has declined significantly, while other actors have struggled to provide viable alternatives. The United States remains relatively disengaged at the strategic level, and China's involvement is largely economic, without a corresponding security role. This has resulted in an environment characterized by overlapping interests but a lack of coordination, further complicating efforts to address the underlying drivers of instability.

**STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

The trajectory of the Sahel highlights the need for a more coherent and coordinated approach. Regional security frameworks must be better aligned, and key regional actors need to be integrated into a unified strategy capable of addressing the cross-border nature of the threat. Counter-terrorism efforts must extend beyond military operations to include the systematic disruption of jihadist financial networks, particularly those linked to natural resources and illicit trade. At the same time, a sustainable

response requires combining security measures with governance reform, economic development, and stronger engagement with local populations. Finally, international actors must move away from reactive and fragmented involvement toward a more consistent, long-term strategic commitment to regional stability.

**CONCLUSION**

The intensification of jihadist activity in the Sahel is no longer a localized phenomenon. It reflects a broader transformation with significant regional and global implications.

While Al-Qaeda has not yet achieved a full strategic victory, the developments observed in 2026 indicate that it is approaching a critical threshold. The shift toward governance, territorial influence, and regional expansion suggests a level of operational maturity that could have long-term consequences.

If current trends persist, the Sahel risks evolving into a durable hub of instability, capable of projecting threats far beyond Africa.

The window for effective action is narrowing. Without a coordinated regional and international response, the consequences will extend well beyond the Sahel.\*

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Credit: Morteza Nikoubazl via Reuters Connect

# DOES DECAPITATION WORK FOR REGIME CHANGE?



by Anand Toprani, Dillon Prochnicki

**T**he U.S. and Israeli decapitation of Iran’s senior political leadership in 2026 failed to produce regime change. The clerical regime and the Revolutionary Guard Corps remain in power. But does this failure mean the strategy of decapitation never has any utility? This essay examines the historical record to identify the conditions under which political decapitation may topple a regime.

Our scope is narrow. Decapitation can serve as an military tool for degrading command and control, but that is a different objective with a distinct logic. Our question is: when can killing an adversary’s leadership cause the regime itself to fall?

The identity of a nation’s leader can absolutely change the course of history. Lenin’s personal leadership was essential to the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, and the replacement of the liberal German Emperor Frederick III by his lunatic son Wilhelm II after only 99 days set the stage for Germany’s misfortunes during the First World War. But changing history and collapsing regimes are different things. To understand when leader removal threatens the regime itself, let’s turn to some historical analogies based on different regime types.

## DEMOCRACIES

Democracies distribute authority across institutions and have routine, tested mechanisms for succession. This makes them structurally resilient to regime change through leader removal. Athens after the death of Pericles in 429 BC illustrates both that resilience and its limits. Pericles had sustained a defensive strategy built on restraint: Athens would not fight Sparta’s superior army in the field but would withdraw behind the Long Walls, surrender the countryside, and rely on naval superiority and financial reserves to outlast its adversary. The strategy was unpopular, requiring Athenians to exchange their farms for overcrowded streets to achieve long-term positional advantage. The overcrowding behind the “Long Walls” created the conditions for a plague that killed a significant proportion of the population, including Pericles himself.

Despite losing a significant proportion of Athens’ population, the Athenian regime did not collapse. It elected a new leader, Cleon, who promised to wage the war more vigorously. But Pericles’ defensive strategy, which required his personal authority to sustain, did not survive him. According to Thucydides’ classic history, after Pericles’ death, no successor had the political standing to enforce that discipline. Athenian politics fractured, and Pericles’ strategic framework gave way to a series of increasingly risky and escalatory decisions, culminating in

the catastrophic Sicilian Expedition of 415 BC, a massive amphibious campaign that Pericles' framework would never have sanctioned. Its destruction in 413 BC created many of the conditions for Athens' eventual surrender, but that occurred only after the destruction of Athens' fleet in 404 BC due to the failures of Athens' collective leadership rather than the absence of any specific leader. In democracies, therefore, decapitation does not threaten the regime, but it can remove a leader whose authority sustains a particular strategic course.

### AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES WITH INSTITUTIONAL DEPTH

The Soviet Union and post-Mao China suggest that authoritarian, specifically Marxist-Leninist regimes can absorb leader removal. Joseph Stalin dominated the Soviet system as thoroughly as any dictator in history, yet his death in 1953 produced a durable transition: first a troika, then the elimination of Beria, and eventually Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power, all without significant bloodshed. The regime survived because the Communist Party had institutional depth, the security services maintained order, and elites were committed to the survival of the system even in Stalin's absence.

But survival and continuity are not the same. Within three years, Khrushchev had denounced Stalin, reversed major policies, and released prisoners. The regime's label persisted, but its character changed substantially. This raises a measurement problem: over what time horizon do we judge the effects? A regime that survives in the short term may transform significantly over the medium term.

China's post-Mao transition was rougher than a tidy narrative of collective leadership suggests. Under Deng, Mao's successor as Chairman, Hua Guofeng, was sidelined early; Hua's successor, Hu Yaobang, was later purged; and Hu's successor, Zhao Ziyang, was placed under permanent house arrest after he declined to squash the Tiananmen Square

protests Hu's death triggered. Deng Xiaoping exercised paramount authority informally while successive designated successors were removed when they deviated. The Chinese Communist Party provided enough institutional scaffolding to manage each crisis.

What these cases share is that, despite the leader's dominance, authority was not solely concentrated in one person. The party had institutional depth. Elites were committed to the system's continuation. And a mechanism, tacit or explicit, for transferring power existed. These features appear to be what determines whether a regime absorbs the blow.

### WHEN THE LEADER IS THE SYSTEM

Adolf Hitler's Germany lacked all three features. As Ian Kershaw described, the "Fuehrer myth" meant the German people and even some regime leaders ascribed all successes to Hitler personally. This myth had a concrete origin: it was Hitler's personal insistence that Germany abandon the predictable Schlieffen Plan in 1940 in favor of Erich von Manstein's offensive through the Ardennes. The resulting, almost miraculous, victory over France, hard on the heels of his diplomatic triumphs at Munich and through the Nazi-Soviet Pact, solidified his reputation as a "genius" and discouraged anyone, including the military leadership, from challenging him. The competing fiefdoms of the Nazi state – the Wehrmacht, the SS, the party bureaucracy, and the regional Gauleiter – operated through access to Hitler rather than through independent institutional authority. He was not merely the leader but also the system's organizing principle. Elite commitment was eroding by 1944, as the July 20 plotters concluded that Hitler was leading Germany to destruction. The Nazi Party's reputation for corruption and incompetence meant that loyalty to the regime, as distinct from loyalty to Hitler, was thinning. His designated successor, Hermann Goering, lacked any credibility or even the inclination to continue fighting.

When Hitler committed suicide in April 1945, resistance collapsed almost immediately. The successor regime under Admiral Karl Doenitz sought only to end the war. Regime officials who had executed soldiers and civilians for attempting to surrender now gave up, fled, or committed suicide en masse. Over half of all Germans who died during the war perished during its last year, when defeat was evident to everyone who cared to look, yet no guerrilla resistance materialized against the Allied occupiers. The man who had been the system's sole legitimating basis was gone, and nothing remained to sustain the fight.

The July 20 plot case adds an important qualification. It was not a pure decapitation. It was an assassination combined with an organized coup: Reserve Army mobilization, SS disarmament in Paris and Prague, and a prepared alternative leadership. The assassination was the trigger, but the coup infrastructure was the mechanism. Even in a maximally vulnerable regime, decapitation may require an internal actor prepared to exploit the opening.

The phase of conflict also mattered. The same assassination in 1940, after the fall of France, might not have produced regime change. Elite commitment was high and the regime appeared to be succeeding. By 1944, years of losing had eroded the conditions sustaining the regime. Vulnerability to decapitation is not fixed; the state of the war itself can enhance or reduce it.

### IRAN: ENGINEERED RESILIENCE

Iran is striking because it represents a regime that studied the vulnerability the historical cases reveal and built against it. The IRGC formally outlined its "mosaic defense" doctrine in 2005 and restructured into 31 provincial commands in 2008, deliberately designed to prevent the rapid collapse that followed Saddam Hussein's centralized command in 2003. The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War provided further validation, demonstrating that a decentralized, cell-based structure could withstand Israeli targeting

of senior leaders. Each provincial command operates as an independent entity with its own intelligence capabilities, logistics chains, and pre-delegated authority for contingency operations.

The regime's design addresses each vulnerability. Authority is distributed across IRGC, Artesh, Basij, clerical networks, and provincial authorities. The Supreme Leader functions/ed less as the sole hub of the system than as an arbiter among competing power centers; remove him, and the institutions retain the capacity to function. Elite commitment is high: the IRGC, Basij, and others have material and ideological stakes in the regime's continuation that are inseparable from their own institutional survival and they have developed the tools to suppress recalcitrant elites including potentially the President. Unlike the Wehrmacht in 1944, whose officer corps had concluded the regime was destroying Germany, there is no institutional constituency within Iran's power structure that would benefit from the regime's collapse. Succession capacity exists through the Assembly of Experts and Khamenei's son is now the Supreme Leader (though his authority relative to the IRGC remains unclear). The 2026 decapitation failed to produce regime change to date and the regime appears more robust than assumed at the outset of the campaign.

### THE FRAMEWORK

The cases point toward three variables that influence whether decapitation can produce regime change.

The first is authority concentration: the degree to which the regime depends on the leader as its coordinating hub. This maps onto Max Weber's typology of legitimate authority. Regimes resting on charismatic authority are inherently vulnerable because the source of legitimacy dies with the leader. Regimes that have routinized their authority through institutional, traditional, or rational-legal

structures can survive leader removal. Hitler never routinized his charisma. The Communist parties in the Soviet Union and China did (at least for a time). Iran combines some traditional authority (the clerical hierarchy) with some rational-legal authority (the constitutional structure), giving it two sources of legitimacy independent of any single leader and with well-honed tools of suppression where those two fall short.

The second is elite commitment: whether a sufficient collection of the people controlling the instruments of power have independent reasons to sustain the regime. Elite defection, not popular uprising, is the proximate mechanism of collapse. Commitment can rest on material interest, ideology, absence of alternatives, or complicity. These anchors reinforce each other when the regime is functioning and erode simultaneously when it begins visibly failing.

The third is succession capacity: whether authority can transfer through a tested mechanism. Tested succession is the strongest resilience indicator; absent succession is a critical vulnerability.

Two contextual modifiers affect these variables. The phase of conflict matters because war degrades all three: it erodes elite commitment, tests succession mechanisms, and can undermine authority concentration. The follow-through of either external or internal actors matters because even a vulnerable regime may survive if no one exploits the disruption. The July 20 plotters had prepared internal follow-through; the external Allies, committed to unconditional surrender, had not.

A further limitation: every case where decapitation plausibly produced regime collapse involved total or existential war. In limited wars, the calculus differs. Elites are less likely to defect, authority concentration matters less because the full state apparatus is not mobilized, and the leader may be less identified with the war effort. Iran 2026 was an unlimited war for Iran, compounding the structural reasons decapitation failed.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Decapitation can produce regime change, but only when authority is concentrated in the leader, elite commitment is eroding, and no tested succession mechanism exists, amplified by severe military pressure and attacker follow-through. This combination is historically rare. The single clear suggestive case, Hitler's Germany, is an extreme outlier on every dimension. The rarity is itself a finding.

The conditions are observable in advance, which makes decapitation assessable rather than a pure gamble. It also means regimes can engineer against it. Iran spent two decades doing exactly that. Contemporary China presents an interesting counter-trajectory. Under Xi Jinping, authority has been reconcentrated, alternative power centers purged, and no visible successor designated. If the framework is correct, these developments have increased China's structural vulnerability relative to the collective leadership era, though the military and party's institutional depth still provide significant resilience.

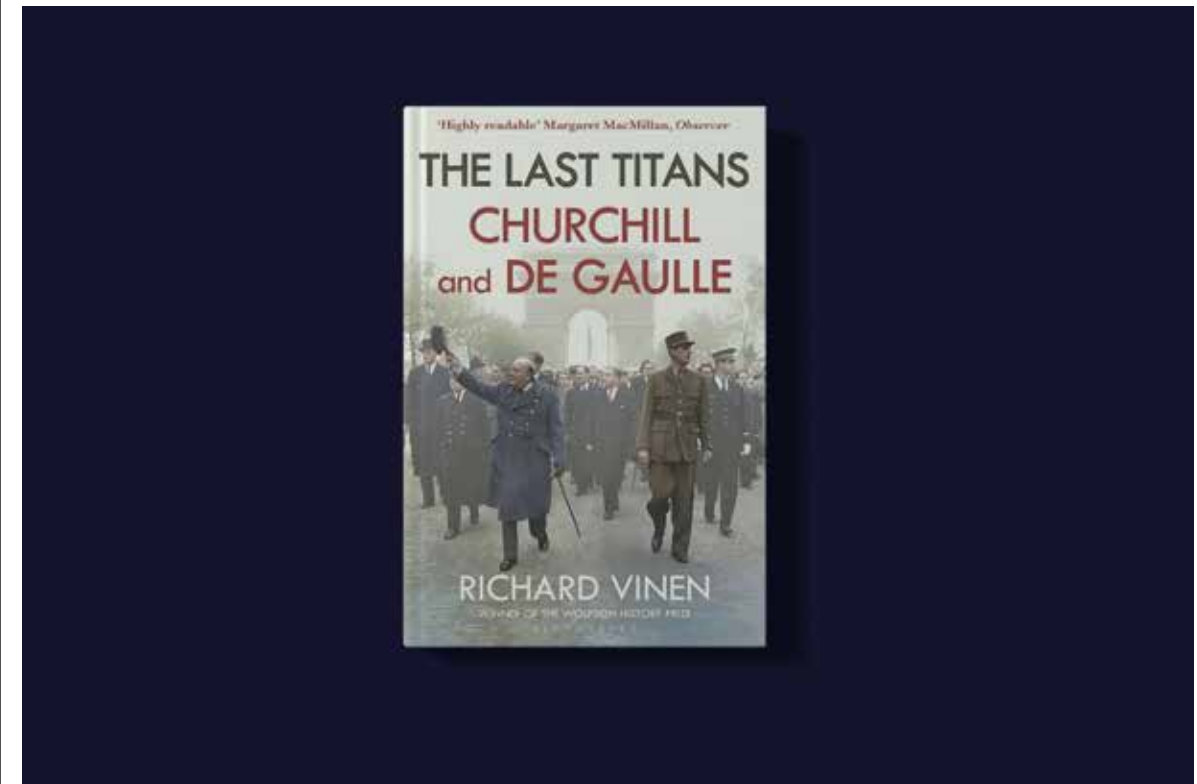
For nations contemplating decapitation as a path to regime change, the framework suggests diagnostic questions: Is authority concentrated in the leader or distributed? Are elites committed to the system or the leader? Is there a tested succession mechanism? What is the phase of conflict, and who is prepared to exploit the disruption? Only when these answers align does decapitation offer a plausible path to regime change. In all other cases, it may disrupt, delay, or degrade, but it will not deliver the decisive political result its proponents seek. \*

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# SAVIORS OF THEIR NATIONS

*The Last Titans: How Churchill and de Gaulle Saved their Nations and Transformed the World*

Review of Richard Vinen. Simon and Schuster, 2026, 388 pp. \$30.00

BY JACOB HEILBRUNN

**D**onald Trump has frequently likened himself to Winston Churchill. In filing class-action lawsuits against major social media companies in 2021, he drew on Churchill to declare, “We’ll fight in the courts, we’ll fight in the legislatures, and we’ll fight at the ballot boxes.” More recently, Trump alluded to Churchill’s British Prime Minister Keir Starmer for his manifest reluctance to participate in the Iran war by contrasting him with Churchill. “This is not Winston Churchill we’re dealing with,” Trump said.

It would be difficult to imagine an American president similarly invoking the name of the former French leader Charles de Gaulle. But in his sterling new dual biography *The Last Titans*, Richard Vinen suggests that like Churchill, de Gaulle played a pivotal role in creating the modern world. Both men were soldiers, orators, writers and thinkers about military strategy and history who helped rescue their nations during World War II. Vinen is a professor of history at King’s College London. His book is filled with shrewd assessments and elegantly written.

De Gaulle referred to Churchill as “the great artist of a great history,” while Churchill lauded his French counterpart as *l’homme du destin*. For all their mutual admiration and fascination with the past, they formed something of an odd couple. Unlike the meditative and enigmatic de Gaulle, Churchill was a showman.

As the son of Lord Randolph Churchill—a member of the Tory party whose career had capsized when he impulsively resigned his

position as Chancellor of the Exchequer—Winston Spencer Churchill was intent on vindicating the family name. But the impetuous nature that Churchill inherited from his father meant that he did not climb the greasy pole until relatively late in life. Indeed, Churchill was regarded with misgivings by many of his coevals—as an overly flamboyant and mercurial figure who had led Great Britain straight into the disaster of Gallipoli during World War I. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, moreover, he returned Britain to the gold standard in 1925, plunging it into a prolonged economic slump. The great British historian A.J.P. Taylor observed, “If he had died in 1939 at the age of 65, he would now be regarded as an eccentric character, sometimes a radical, sometimes a Tory, and running over with brilliant ideas that were more often wrong than right.”

Churchill, who was born in 1874 at the zenith of the Victorian era, attended Sandhurst. In 1895, he was commissioned into the Queen’s Own 4<sup>th</sup> Hussars, a cavalry regiment that served in India. He attracted attention for his journalistic writings from Cuba and South Africa, where he wrote a dramatic account of his escape from a Boer prisoner-of-war camp. This eminent Victorian took it for granted that Great Britain would preside over an empire that served as a force for stability abroad. Churchill saw himself as its foremost exponent. “He knew himself to be exceptional,” Vinen writes, “and took it for granted that he would be the center of attention.”

By contrast, de Gaulle, who was born in 1890 into a family of provincial nobility, circulated in a different milieu—Catholic royalists who viewed the republic with frigid reserve but were dedicated to the French nation itself. De Gaulle’s

parents regarded the French Revolution of 1789 with horror, living in what Vinen terms a form of internal exile. They venerated the idea of France, not its current incarnation.

Another difference with Churchill is that de Gaulle, Vinen writes, “made no great claims about himself as an individual.” Instead, his aim was to serve the national ambitions of France. According to Vinen, he was “one of the greatest speakers of the twentieth century, but his most impressive quality was one that almost all twentieth-century politicians (Churchill especially) lacked: the capacity to remain silent.”

During the 1930s, Churchill sounded the tocsin about Nazi Germany’s malign intentions. As early as 1934, he warned that “Germany is rearming. That is the great new fact which rivets the attention of every country in Europe.” In 1936 he implored the British government to assist France in averting Germany’s occupation of the Rhineland, an early step in Hitler’s drive to restore German prestige and power. For Churchill an unshakable British alliance with France to counter Germany was imperative. “Faith in the French army was the cornerstone of his thinking,” Vinen writes, “and the reason why he believed that Britain could get by with a relatively small army.”

Illustrative of Churchill’s proclivity for imaginative geopolitical thinking is that he also began contemplating in 1935 an alliance with Russia to stymie Germany. Churchill had long been a fervent foe of Bolshevism, but he recognized that Nazism was the more immediate peril. The Russian ambassador Ivan Maisky—who makes an appearance in Anthony Powell’s roman-fleuve *A Dance to the Music of Time* in the form of a monkey, and whose diaries were released in 2016 by Yale University Press—soon became a valued interlocutor of Churchill’s. Maisky persuaded Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden to visit Moscow in March 1935, but the meeting with Stalin proved inconclusive. In September 1938, Maisky visited Churchill who told him, ‘In my cellar I have a bottle of wine from 1793! Not bad, eh? I’m keeping it for a very

special, truly exceptional occasion.’

‘Which exactly, may I ask you?’ Churchill grinned cunningly, paused, then suddenly declared: ‘We’ll drink the bottle together when Great Britain and Russia beat Hitler’s Germany!’ I was almost dumbstruck. Churchill’s hatred of Berlin really has gone beyond all limits!’ 1793 was, of course, the year that Louis XVI was guillotined. On July 16, 1945 Churchill visited the Führerbunker in Berlin, where Hitler and his consort, Eva Braun, had committed suicide as Russian troops approached. Churchill sat amidst the ruins and contentedly puffed away on his favorite cigar.

De Gaulle, Vinen observes, was never in doubt that France would end up in a military conflict with Germany. He saw the Nazi regime as a natural outgrowth of the Hohenzollern monarchy and the Prussian military caste with its emphasis on *Kadavergehorsamkeit*, or corpse-like obedience. During the 1930s, de Gaulle pushed for the establishment of a professional as opposed to a conscript army. When it came to strategy, he focused on technological innovation and land warfare, particularly tank engagements. His chief patron was Paul Reynaud, a staunch opponent of Nazi Germany during the interwar years and a member of the Alliance Democratique.

After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany. The so-called “phony war” prevailed as Hitler directed his attention to the Eastern front. After the German invasion of Belgium and France in 1940, Churchill and de Gaulle met for the first time. French forces quickly capitulated in what the historian Marc Bloch termed “a strange defeat.” Churchill was stunned. De Gaulle was not. He saw the collapse of the French state as an almost predestined shipwreck.

On May 10, 1940, Churchill became prime minister, replacing the hapless Neville Chamberlain. Appeasement was out. Martial vigor was in. In early June, Churchill proposed a Franco-British Union to try and bolster the

spirits of the French. But Marshal Philippe Pétain had already become prime minister and set about seeking an armistice with Germany. The result was the rise of Vichy France. Headquartered in the Free Zone in southern France, it existed until 1944 and never signed a formal peace treaty with Germany.

De Gaulle himself fled to Great Britain. On June 18, he delivered a celebrated speech on the BBC, calling upon the Free French to continue battling Nazi Germany: “the flame of French resistance must not and will not go out.” He urged French soldiers and armaments workers to continue the battle from Britain. By July 6,000 French people had joined Gaullist forces in Britain.

De Gaulle never matched Churchill’s importance during World War II. He nourished the thought that the United States might serve as a counterweight to Britain. But Franklin Roosevelt never took him that seriously. Vinen notes that when Churchill visited Washington in May 1943, Roosevelt and Cordell voiced their displeasure with de Gaulle and showed him “documents that seemed to reflect de Gaulle’s hostility or lack of grace towards his English and American allies.” In the end, de Gaulle won a spot for France as one of the four powers that ruled a defeated Germany after 1945.

What are we to make of these two leaders? Churchill’s high-water mark was his fervent defense of the British realm before American entry INTO WORLD WAR II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. De Gaulle never played as pivotal a role as Churchill during World War II.

But as the scholar Michael Mandelbaum has noted in the *New Criterion*, de Gaulle eclipsed Churchill during the postwar era. Churchill returned to power in 1951. In ailing health, he was, as the British statesman and writer Roy Jenkins put it, “gloriously unfit for office.” Churchill resigned in 1955, perishing a decade later, Knight of the Garter. The 1956 Suez Crisis, bungled by Churchill’s longtime protégé, Anthony Eden, was the final act of the British empire that Churchill had sought to preserve.

In 1958, de Gaulle became the first president of the Fifth Republic. Four years later, he ended the Algerian War of Independence. Both he and Churchill were saviors of their countries. \*

#### — JACOB HEILBRUNN

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