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For Israel, war is the only answer

Netanyahu continues to derive his strength from the country's ability to wage war. But he is failing to show any ability to win

In the days leading up to the two-week cease-fire between the United States and Iran, Israeli officials worried that the war might soon be over. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly ordered more strikes on Iran, as if trying to get in as much damage as possible before President Trump forced Israel to stop. No matter that Israel and the US had been pounding Iran relentlessly for five weeks and Israel's air force said it had nearly exhausted its vital targets against Iranian military and nuclear industries. Israel had already begun striking steel factories and petrochemical plants.

Then, on the day the cease-fire came into shaky effect – and most civilians across the region began to breathe a sigh of relief – Israel proceeded to launch one of the deadliest strikes on Lebanon ever, including in the heart of densely populated Beirut, without any warning. The operation, which the Israel Defense Forces say attacked Hezbollah command centres, hit 100 targets in 10 minutes, killed over 350 people and wounded well over 1 000, many of them civilians.

The job is never done

In most countries that have been at war, cease-fires are a welcome development, or, at the very least, something to which leaders aspire. But for Israel's maximalist leaders, cease-fires are too often seen as getting in the way of efforts to finish the job. And even when Israel enters cease-fires, it continues to fire unilaterally — as with Gaza and Lebanon. War is increasingly the state's go-to response to geopolitical challenges — not just the strategy but the norm. After the cease-fire with Iran was imposed upon Netanyahu, he issued a statement insisting that the job was not yet done. He then reiterated those comments in a speech on Saturday night: 'The battle is not yet over.' When Trump forced a cease-fire in Gaza back in October, the Israeli prime minister said similar things, declaring that Israel would eventually achieve its goals there — 'the easy way' or 'the

hard way'.

For Israel's leadership, if war is the status quo, the job is never done, and you can never lose, because you are always still in the fight.

Much of the Israeli public has bought into this approach. At the end of March, after four weeks of running to shelters with no school and no sleep, 78 per cent of Jewish Israelis still supported the war against Iran. (At the outset of the war, it was an astounding 93 per cent.)
While Netanyahu's popularity among Israelis remains low, their support for the wars he is leading remains high.

Still, there are differences. With his gaze on his own political survival and legacy, Netanyahu seems to have a larger appetite for conflict than the public, which may be willing to go to war, but wants to see wars won and done.

The problem is that the Israelis' definition of victory is framed by a distorted reality shaped by a leadership promising that threats can and must be eliminated through invasion and occupation.

Recent polling found Israelis questioning the success of the Iran war. They are right to question this: the enriched uranium is still in Iran, Iran's regime has not fallen and has even hardened, it was able to fire ballistic missiles consistently throughout the war, and it introduced an entirely new strategic predicament by holding the world economy hostage through the Strait of Hormuz. Netanyahu continues to derive his strength, and pursue Israeli regional power projection, from the country's ability to wage war. But he is failing to show the ability to win.

The problem, of course, is that Israelis' definition of victory is framed by a distorted reality shaped by a leadership promising that threats can and must be eliminated through invasion and occupation, that governments can be changed by airstrikes, and by a media that rarely provides any insight into the human costs of their actions. With the exception of Democrats Party head Yair Golan, who consistently speaks of the need to translate military achievements into diplomatic resolutions, there is almost no one on the political landscape in Israel challenging the country's tendency to treat war as a tool of first resort in statecraft.

The country's tolerance for forever war masks the reality of Israel's current situation in its theatres in Iran, Lebanon and Gaza. The endless push to keep striking these adversaries to degrade their capabilities has revealed the limitations of Israel's own military force. After all, if you

need to keep doing more and more of something, it suggests that what you are doing is not working. Case in point: Soon after the cease-fire with Iran, the I.D.F. reportedly presented the government with warnings that Tehran is already trying to rebuild its ability to produce more missiles, despite Netanyahu's having just assured Israelis that 'we smashed Iran's missile production machine' and the Iranians were no longer producing new missiles.

A never-ending effort

Nowhere are the shortcomings of Israel's forever war more apparent than in Lebanon, a country that Israel has invaded seven times in five decades. In the fall of 2024, Israel dealt a huge blow to Hezbollah with both the so-called pager operation, which killed 12 and wounded thousands of Hezbollah members, and the subsequent killing of Hezbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah. And yet, although these attacks weakened Hezbollah, altered the balance of power in the region and contributed to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah remains a fighting force. After Israel and the US launched the war in Iran, Hezbollah joined the war and has fired as many as 6 500 rockets and drones at Israel since 2 March.

Israel's stated goal is to disarm Hezbollah, but the I.D.F. itself has made clear that doing so is not feasible strictly through military force. Even so, the I.D.F. proceeded to follow the same playbook as it did in Gaza, depopulating entire neighbourhoods and destroying villages, an approach that in Gaza did not lead to the disarmament of Hamas. Nevertheless, over the past six weeks, Israeli strikes in Lebanon have continued, forcing more than a million people from their homes and leaving over 2 000 people dead and multiple villages in ruins.

When war becomes the norm, everyone loses.

In Lebanon, as in Iran, Israel's use of force has run its course. If you've already taken out Nasrallah and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran, threatening to take out the new Hezbollah leader, Naim Qassem, as the Israeli defence minister has done, just doesn't pack the same punch. Certainly, as far as Israel is concerned, degrading the number and efficacy of Hezbollah's and Iran's offensive capabilities is critical to lowering the potency of the threats they pose at a given moment. But there does not seem to be any limit to this action, making this a never-ending effort to mow the grass again and again, no matter how fast or fiercely it grows

back. And that is all Netanyahu is actually offering Israelis: a never-ending war.

As Iran and the US try to edge toward some kind of agreement, no matter how fragile, diplomacy itself hinges partly on a cease-fire between Israel and Lebanon. It is against this backdrop that Trump reportedly pressured Netanyahu to scale back strikes in Lebanon and enter talks with the Lebanese government.

Iran has demanded that a cease-fire include Lebanon. Israel has grudgingly agreed to negotiate while continuing to exchange fire with Hezbollah. This is not good-faith diplomacy. Israel's interest in bringing Iran's largest proxy further to its knees should not override regional peace efforts, especially when Israel has not succeeded in doing so through force. It has a potential partner in Beirut, where Lebanon's feeble government is also interested in subduing Hezbollah.

Leaders should strive for peace, not war. They should look to end wars, not perpetuate them; turn to them as a means, not an end. When war becomes the norm, everyone loses.

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