Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

"Gaza: The Human Toll
Dahlia Scheindlin on Israeli Opinion"

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FEATURING

Dahlia Scheindlin

Political Analyst and Columnist, Haaretz;
Author, "The Crooked Timber of Democracy in Israel"

CSIS EXPERTS

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J. Stephen Morrison: Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. I'm J. Stephen Morrison. I'm Senior Vice President here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, a think tank based in Washington, D.C.

Today we have the 17th episode of a CSIS broadcast series Gaza: The Human Toll. We started that back on November 13th of 2023, shortly after the massacre on October 7th by Hamas of 1,200 citizens inside Israel and the capture of 251 hostages and the onset of war between Israel and Hamas that followed.

This is a product of the CSIS Bipartisan Alliance for Global Health Security here at CSIS. And it's a partnership with my colleagues Michelle Strucke, who directs the Humanitarian Agenda at CSIS; and Jon Alterman, senior vice president, who directs the Middle East Program here at CSIS.

Before I introduce our featured speaker here, I want to offer special thanks to my colleague, Sophia Hirshfield, who worked to coordinate and bring all of these pieces together; and to our remarkable production team here, Eric Ruditskiy and Qi Yu.

We're delighted to be joined today by Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin, an Israeli political strategist and public-opinion expert. She's advised eight national campaigns in Israel. She's worked in over 15 countries. She's a fellow at the Century Foundation. She's a regular contributor to The Guardian, to Haaretz, to The New York Times, and elsewhere. She's the author of "The Crooked Timber of Democracy in Israel," which was published in September of last year to much acclaim. She's widely read, widely respected; prodigious output in reading her material. I'll bring in references to some of her most recent writings on the water crisis in Gaza and West Bank and the question around Israeli opinion vis-à-vis this crisis and how do we explain that.

So welcome, Dahlia. It's such a pleasure to have you with us. Thank you for making the time. We're really honored to have you here today.

Dahlia Scheindlin: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Morrison: Let me open with one broad question. We want to use today to better understand the opinion climate within Israel, which is not a single thing, it's many different things; how Israeli opinion breaks down on the health and humanitarian crisis that's been unfolding in Gaza.

I want to understand the different factors that come into play and what that means in terms of indifference or opposition or support and

compassion. Obviously, the October 7th Hamas massacre and the capture of hostages had profound impacts, and you've written about that. The ICC and – the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice actions and the threat of further actions has some impact.

We have the government itself, the Netanyahu government calculations and the internal politics within Israel and then the deep and toxic chasm between the government and U.N. agencies that reaches back many years.

So there's many factors that come into play. You've attempted better than I think almost anyone else to try to very fairly and accurately track and summarize how opinion has taken shape.

So tell us in a few words, if you could, give us the big picture of how things have evolved over time.

Dr. Scheindlin: Thank you. Thank you, and also thank you for having me.

The big picture, as you put it, is very complicated because, you know, there can be some contradictory dynamics both in terms of how Israelis feel about Palestinians, about Gaza, about the war, about the concept of future peace, versus how they feel about their own government, i.e., very bad.

And then people can have contradictory attitudes within a single survey and then there's, of course, deeply divided attitudes within Israeli society. In some ways we expected to see huge changes like Israeli society becoming much more hard line. In certain ways that's happened. In other ways, some of the dynamics have stayed fairly similar to what they were beforehand.
So I don't want to be too abstract but let me try to, you know, focus on a couple of different trends. One is that, obviously, the beginning of this war led to a very belligerent attitude among the Israeli public.

The immediate reaction, you know, in addition to the shock, the grief, the chaos, the fear, the uncertainty, was that there was no choice other than an extremely aggressive war and, you know, I think that's pretty much across the board within the Israeli Jewish population who saw this primarily as a defensive war.

But even as the war kind of moved from defense to, you know, a more aggressive, you know, aim of toppling Hamas in terms of its military and governing structure and essentially doing a great deal of damage in Gaza people's attitude – people supported that across the board, again,

in the Jewish population, I have to say, because attitudes are completely opposite in Israel's Arab population.

Palestinian citizens of Israel have a completely opposite attitude towards almost everything, and so I have to say that in the beginning when we started to talk about the divisions within the Israeli population that is the biggest division.

So, first, Israeli Jews were feeling very belligerent. They saw it entirely as a matter of necessity and defense even when, you know, the attack had clearly been already stopped and sustained, but the government had set the aims of this kind of something like regime change but to something we don't know what.

And in that context there was very little sense that Israel needed to take responsibility for the humanitarian situation in Gaza or for civilians in Gaza. I have to say this that, you know, for the most part Israelis were not prone to distinguishing between civilians and combatants.

To this end, I think that it's important to note that Hamas and the ministry of health in Gaza does not distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, and Israelis have been saying from the very beginning, you know, certainly, again, Israeli Jews, certain political figures, many political figures have been saying that there are no innocents in Gaza or implying that and legitimizing humanitarian pressure if not actually cutting off humanitarian supplies.

We have very famous quotes from the minister of defense to a former national security advisor, a current minister of finance, who said something recently along those lines and, you know, these kinds of statements supporting things like cutting off food, water, fuel or justifying doing those things have made it all the way to the International Court of Justice as we've spoken about and the International Criminal Court where Israel is facing accusations of purposely committing these kinds of war crimes.

But Israelis – you know, if I'm trying to look at it from their perspective of Israeli Jews, they think that this is simply a necessity in wartime and a matter of survival. And so that's with relation to the war. At the very same time the vast majority of Israelis, and I think this goes for the Jewish and the Palestinian citizens of Israel, are deeply angry at the government.

So this is something a little bit different than we would see in many countries during wartime where you have what we call a rally around the flag effect of support for the government.

The first thing we saw for the first six months was a crash in support for the Israeli government, a huge breach of trust both in the prime minister and his party and his coalition. General kind of generic trust in the government all of those were at an absolute low point.

Some of that has recovered a little bit politically. You know, when you look at how people feel about the current ruling party and the coalition they're still not able to recreate their electoral success of November 2022. But there has been a little bit of recovery as people settle into, I think, more familiar patterns.

But let me get into one more of the familiar patterns we know. And when I talked about the division between the Jewish population of Israel and Palestinian or Arab citizens of Israel, there are deep divisions within the Jewish population as well. And those divisions are the classic divisions between, first of all, people who self-define as left, right, and center. If you ever hear people saying something like, well, left, right, and center is passe, it doesn't matter anymore, don't believe them. It is one of the most, you know, key kind of self-definition questions we can ask in surveys that is one of the top predictors of every other attitude with relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and politics in Israel.

And so, you know, just to give you an example of how people feel about humanitarian aid, when the Israel Democracy Institute conducted a survey in February of 2024, already some months in, and they asked whether people support or oppose the idea of transferring humanitarian aid to the residents, with food, medicine by international bodies who are not linked to Hamas or UNRWA – which Israelis have, of course, roundly traduced – those attitudes break down very significantly by how people identify themselves politically. So about 60 percent of left-wing Jews support it, but only just under 20 percent of right-wing Jews, and centrists break down evenly. And that pattern, you know, I could give you many such numbers, but it's a very consistent pattern during this war, well before this war, and I imagine will continue to be a pattern after this war. Needless to say, the right wing is the majority in Jewish Israeli society, the left wing is a minority. And centrists are a minority too, only about one quarter. But together, left wingers and centrists, who share many attitudes, usually reach to about 40 percent of Jewish Israeli society, and a little more than that if you count Arab citizens who are a little bit less likely to identify along the same lines, which is why we often analyze the Jewish population separately based on ideology.

But that's what I would call the familiar patterns, the patterns that we've seen in place for decades, in terms of how Israeli and Israeli

Jewish attitudes and ideological attitudes break down with relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, occupation, and everything related to it.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you. In one of your essays in May, May 30th published, "Why Do Israelis Continue to Back the War," which partly was addressing this issue of why the why the indifference to the mass suffering and the collapse of humanitarian and health operations, you cited a few things. You said, look, Hamas is a common enemy. This is a unifying force. The profundity of October 7th cannot be underestimated. You went into discussion around how the media – yes, the media behavior and coverage is an important factor, but it's inadequate to explain this. I wanted you to say a bit more about that.

But then you came forward and said, you know, this is a matter of Israelis' collective id, and you talked about this as a society-wide phenomenon that related to what you described as the hermetic closure of Gaza dating back to 2007, that those factors, the last ones were very elementary in explaining attitudes and feelings within Israel. I just wanted you to explain some of those things.

Dr. Scheindlin: Yeah, I have to say that one of the most striking things that I think led me to look at those issues and point those things out is when you talk to Israelis who – you know, anybody beyond the left wing, and I mean even beyond those who consider themselves to be firm left, so I'm going to include in this people who define themselves as moderate left, centrist, and anybody in that large portion who call themselves right wing – so we're talking about the vast majority of Jewish Israeli society – a lot of times what they've been saying since October 7th is, what was so bad about Gaza. We gave them Gaza. What more could they want? They did October 7th just because they're like that, or just because they hate Jews, or just because they have all become Hamas supporters. And there was such a profound, you know, dismissal of the reality of life in Gaza, and also the reality of Israeli control over Gaza.

It's something that, you know, I, as somebody who is a policy analyst, I've been trying to point out for many years, along with many of my colleagues who have anything to do with knowing the ins and outs of this conflict or working on human rights, that, you know, something that also international bodies in the U.N. have pointed out as well, that Gaza was still under effective control of Israel after 2005 after Israel withdrew its settlements. And it withdrew the army from inside Gaza, but it retained such hermetic control over so much else that affects life in Gaza. I don't need to go through the whole list, but most of the crossings except for Rafah, and even that was kind of coordinated with the Egyptians; seaports, airspace, electromagnetic fields, everything that went in or out, blanket restrictions on people traveling in or out,

importing, exporting. Travel out of Gaza became – you know, especially to the West Bank, became more the exception than the rule. One had to go through massive amounts of bureaucracy and basically begging for permits just to move.

So everything about life in Gaza was, you know, controlled in some way, at the heart of it, by Israel. But Israelis, by and large, just – you even can't say refused, because it would be hard for them even to know about it. And when people blame the media coverage in Israel during the war, when I said it's not enough, I mean, you have to go back for the last 20 years of media coverage. Why was this not known in Israeli society? Were people purposely not seeing?

I think that, you know, it depends on how forgiving you want to be, but you really do have – you really did have to look to find this information. You didn't have to look hard, but most Israelis simply insisted that everything was basically politically OK in Gaza. Israel gave it to them. That' s the statement you hear people say. They chose Hamas; never mind that elections were in 2006, when the majority of Gazans today weren't born yet, the majority of Gazans who would be old enough to vote now. And yet this is the very simple understanding in Israeli society, which means that they have no – let's just use the dreaded C word. They have no context for why this turned into an escalation.

Now, I would – I never would justify what happened on October 7th. Nobody should ever justify it. You know, enough said. I mean, there's – it's a crime against civilians. It's terrorism. It's, you know, all of the worst things. There is, at the same time – well, it's not at the same time. I just want to point out that, you know, year after year, throughout Israel's policy, I and everybody else who was looking closely at the situation knew that there would be an escalation of some sort. We didn't have to work very hard to know that. There have been numerous other escalations between Israel and Hamas. And it was just a matter of understanding that what happened before would probably happen again, each time bound to get worse.

That is the nature of unresolved military conflicts. And when there's an occupation of this severity, you know, that affects people's lives so deeply, so restrictive – you know, preventing them from pretty much every opportunity, leading to situations of 45 percent unemployment, no horizon, you know, people who are essentially locked in – there's no question that that pressure would come out in violence in some way.

And so after October 7th, what I saw was that Israelis basically dug into this perspective. They couldn't see beyond it. All they could see was that October 7th came out of nowhere, which is a little bit strange, because

that sense of Israelis being so surprised was exactly what we felt in every single escalation – ground fighting. You can call them wars – I call them wars – between Israeli and Hamas before this, from, you know – from 2009 – I won't go through all the names, but 2009, 2012, 2014, 2021.

Each time Israelis said where did this come from? What do they want from us? We gave them Gaza. And so they revert to a sense of familiar Israeli self-perception, which is that there's no reason people would do this to us other than hatred, anti-Semitism, you know, maybe a kind of racist, you know, they're-primitive-and-they-just-want-to-kill-us sort of thing. And as a result, we have to fight back in a kind of primitive way. And that justifies Israel's actions no matter what international law says. So for many Israelis, the idea that it should be adhering to international law, maintaining standards of, you know, the laws of war, human rights and, you know, treatment of – better treatment of civilians, protection of civilians in wartime, the answer that Israelis will give you day after day is what world is that? We don't live in that world. Look what Hamas did. This is where – this is the region we're in. Why should we be held to that standard?

And, you know, this has to be understood. It's painful to watch. And at the same time, this has been the public environment, the public information and kind of the consciousness of Israelis, for way, way before October 7th. So when people blame the media's coverage of the war, I think it's so much deeper than that.

Dr. Morrison: Yes. No, that's – you explained that very clearly.

Let's shift to the question of what are the possibilities for renewed cooperation, however discreet or quiet or out of view, between Israeli interests – official, nongovernmental – and partners that are operating in Gaza to try to address the suffering and bring about a restoration of basic health services, to speak to the widening disease outbreaks and the need for reconstruction and the like. You've written recently a lot about the water-sanitation-hygiene crisis inside Gaza and West Bank, and what that means for Israelis. You've made a(n) argument about a common epidemiological space occupied by Palestinians and Israelis, and the need to recognize that. We know there are negotiations underway right now between UNICEF and the Israeli authorities to restore, for instance, electrical power for a major desalination plant in Khan Younis. We know that there's lots of precedents of cooperation and training and partnerships between Israeli and Palestinian professionals who are in this – in the medical/public health domains. Are there moments emerging of promise? And how do you see things, too? Because there is a legacy – there's a history – and there's a

continued ongoing need for cooperation. We'll talk about polio in a moment as a new – as a newly emergent thing. But you've written about this legacy. You've called for the creation of a joint commission. You've really given this a lot of thought. Where are the moments of opportunity, do you see, right now, Dahlia?

Dr. Scheindlin: Well, it's very hard to find, you know, hopeful things going on right now, but there are a lot of things that are happening by necessity. And I think that I find the biggest measure of hope in the past, not in the distant past. But when you talked about my saying that there is a common epidemiological space, trust me, I am not a public health expert, I'm not a medical expert, but I do think these issues affect everybody's lives, and so I research the stuff. And I think that, you know, the first person – the first people that I saw to use the term a "common epidemiological family" between Israelis and Palestinians was a group of epidemiologists and public health officials who wrote in 2006 about a fascinating effort of Israel-Palestinian-Jordanian cooperation backed by international organizations to help contain avian flu, which was breaking out then. And they – and they did it. And they did it because they had been thinking about it for some years already. It was still at the tail end of various forms of cooperation that had been established in the Oslo Accords despite, you know, very significant problems in the frameworks of Oslo Accords which essentially perpetuated Israel control all these years. But the idea that these two populations have to coordinate over epidemiology and public health seem pretty basic, and they were able to it with really an impressive measure of success, planning ahead, long-term planning, coordinating protocols, figuring out how to – you know, what we now know of as trace and track, that kind of thing. And that's just one example.

But even in these – in the worst of – I say we've been living in the worst of decades. The last couple of decades, where there's been really such a terrible relationship particularly between Israel and Gazans because of Hamas and Israel's refusal to – you know, to allow any sort of – you know, anything like free passage or even the normal kind of – even the normal kind of functioning that they would have been allowed under the Oslo Accords, much of that has been shut down because of Israel's closure of Gaza. However, of course there are ways to interact. I mean, there have been patients coming in from Gaza with the coordination of local and international NGOs. The coordination for those patients has to happen with Gazan authorities, with Gazan hospitals, together with Israeli hospitals. Medical professionals have to share information. You mentioned training, that those are programs also backed sometimes by NGOs. But people have to come in and out of Gaza to Israel for that kind of thing to happen. Again, these are professional cooperations backed by NGOs allowed by Israeli authorities. So these things have been

happening in various forms over the years. And I think that everybody realizes the necessity. During corona there were some efforts like this, especially to bring in medical professionals from Gaza for training in order to help contain it in the early stages.

I think what I – what I find interesting about this stuff is that all of those things that happened over the last, you know, 15 years, let's say, pretty much happened under a Netanyahu government, because Netanyahu has been in power with his right-wing governments since 2009. And this is another way that maybe the Israeli public not knowing very much actually benefits the situation. Nobody made a big deal out of these things. Nobody hid them. They weren't secret. Some of them were reported in the press. Anybody who wanted to learn about these projects could find out by going to the websites of various NGOs or talking to them. But there was no big public protest, OK? People weren't against it. I was able to conduct a survey during corona for the NGO called Gisha that deals with freedom of movement rights in Gaza and, you know, we found that the majority of Israelis were okay with Israel coordinating to train medical professionals from Gaza by bringing them into Israel and I think that trend up until the war continued.

Now, what we see is that when the government wants to legitimize something it knows how to do it, either by saying openly that it's OK or by just not making a big headline out of it, and during the war, for example, when Israel has restored – you know, when Israel was able to reopen a couple of the damaged water lines going from Israel to Gaza or allow fuel into northern Gaza, which guess what, the Israeli government didn't tell the Israeli public about letting fuel into northern Gaza through the Palestinian Water Authority.

Nobody created – nobody raised a protest about it. It's true that when right-wing media outlets get a hold of some of these things they can maybe have an indignant headline that lasts for few hours or a day, but for the most part I think that the government has plenty of strategies for legitimizing this kind of – these kinds of efforts when it wants to.

And even though we've seen, you know, hard line right-wing movements who are trying to block humanitarian aid into Gaza, for example, ultimately, when the government wants that aid to get through it knows how to deal with those protesters and it knows how to continue – how to get – how to continue letting the trucks get into Gaza even if the distribution has been very poor, and that's a different problem.

But I think that the point is, is the Israeli government cannot fall back on some public resistance against this kind of cooperation over very,

very basic needs that are for the sake of the civilian population in Gaza but also for the sake of the Israeli public and that's just the reality. Whatever political side you're on those things need to be done.

Dr. Morrison: Now, you've made the argument that up to now in the war the Israeli government approach on basic needs, the sort of things that were closed down in terms of water, fuel, electric power, medicines, food – that the strategy has been to do the minimum, to have a minimum floor that would, perhaps, stave off famine, stave off complete catastrophe, but keep the pressure on Hamas through the suffering of the population as part of the strategy of war.

You're saying – you're arguing it's time now for the government to make a strategic shift towards seeing this kind of expanded cooperation as in its own interest in trying to move things forward, that it's in the Netanyahu government's interest to shift gears, and you've proposed a commission of professionals – Palestinian, Israeli professionals. You've laid out various principles around partnerships, long-term strategy, data, equity, common equity, and transparency. You've cited all of these different precedents.

Say a bit more about how realistic is that. How do you advocate for this against what we know is really a tsunami of animosity towards the health and humanitarian programs? But as you've said, there's still an ability to maneuver and do – when the decision has been taken to expand cooperation.

What are the prospects for your argument to be realized?

Dr. Scheindlin: Well, let me just say that I don't – when I said that it was in the interests of Israel I did not necessarily mean it's in the interest of the current government politically.

The interests of the current government are to keep itself in power by solidifying its far right-wing base and, you know, the kinds of incentives that that base wants is basically the occupation of Gaza and constructing settlements.

Dr. Morrison: Right.

Dr. Scheindlin: So, no, what I meant is that it's in Israel's interest as a country. Now, you can also argue that it's in the government's interest because these things would certainly look better for Israel on the international stage and, frankly, they would actually indicate that Israel is making an effort to abide by humanitarian – by international humanitarian law and the laws of war, which could help ease – you know, strengthen its situation

at the international court.

It's not that I think it should be done for show but that's why we have the law, to get people to hold themselves to those standards.

Having said that, I also want to make the point that when I wrote that policy analysis advocating for long-term – immediate – using – leveraging the immediate crisis in order to build – put into place the foundations for long-term public health cooperation, first of all, that was published earlier in 2024. I began thinking about it in January. In other words, back then, it was way past the time when Israel should have – Israel, frankly, should never have taken on the policy.

You know, again, if I read the policy correctly – nobody's inside the heads of Mr. Netanyahu – but as I read the policy, it was the minimum amount to avoid, you know, very visible forms of starvation – even though that didn't happen, there were very visible forms of starvation – but maximum possible pressure on the civilian population, hoping that that would pressure Hamas. That was a failed strategy for the first few months of the war, never mind immoral and a violation of international law. It was also a failed strategy, immoral, and a violation of international law going back to 2007. Israel has had some version of that strategy, conceptually, pressuring the civilian population through the denial of basic needs through almost this entire time, and it has been a failure from day one. The population will not revolt against Hamas for that reason, and Hamas doesn't care if its population is suffering, and that is what we've seen ever since the beginning of this war. It should not have been a surprise, because that's what we've been seeing this entire time.

OK. So that's, let's say, the starting point. And the government may not see it as it's in its political interest, but it should be looking at Israel's international interest and, first and foremost, its health interests, right? The argument that these societies need to cooperate over public health is not – to my mind, it's not even a choice to be made. It's a necessity. They share water resources. Well. I mean, Israel controls a lot of the water resources, but you know, when, when the sewage system collapses, or is backed up in Gaza, or if there's not enough fuel, which has happened many times before this war – to power Gaza's sewage treatment plants, for example, that sewage then flows into the sea and affects Israelis, or damages Israel's own, you know, desalination plants and aquifers.

Same thing in the West Bank, by the way. We should never disconnect Gaza from the West Bank, conceptually, because they're not disconnected nationally, and the entire region cannot be disconnected

physically or in terms of public health. So my point was that there must be coordination between Palestinian health officials in Gaza, public health experts, epidemiologists, doctors, everybody who can help stem this extremely severe emergency situation to coordinate with the Israelis for what is needed. Just, you know, even if it's with the coordinator for government activities in the territories, these are the – there are people who specialize in, you know, health and medical coordination – these kinds of emergency coordinations – of course, with help from international agencies – you know, should establish a basis for going, you know – the government has to really change its policy concept and say we're not trying to give the minimum possible in order to create political pressure, which is never going to happen, but we want to develop long-term systems that will be beneficial to public health in Gaza, among Palestinians in general, and thereby among Israelis as well. And that should – what I was hoping was that could be leveraged to establish longer-term thinking.

And longer-term thinking, again, I don't see it as a luxury. I think that from what I – you know, from how I understand the analyses of successful public health efforts – for example, the one that helped to mitigate, you know, avian flu back in the mid-2000s – they are largely successful when they have long-term policies, when they develop databases for sharing, when they develop shared protocols. These things take time. Working together with professionals, the staff of these kinds of organizations need to build trust, need to develop a common language, and so all of those things are more effective, the more permanent they are, and that's why I just think that this is inevitable if you actually have the benefit of both populations in mind. If your only aim is a self-serving kind of, you know, insistence on staying in power, well, you know, that's governance that basically says that people work for me, and I think that that's something that has long characterized the Netanyahu approach to governance, instead of realizing that government should be working for the people, including their public health.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you, Dahlia.

I'd like to turn to the polio outbreak and what that means. We had wastewater samples back on June 23rd, seven samples that confirmed the transmission was ongoing within the population. Their surveillance systems, obviously, other than wastewater, have largely collapsed, and so that makes it very hard to trace and figure out. There has been genomic work done that determines that that this virus is vaccine derived and came from Egypt in September. We've had three confirmed actual cases, including a 10-month-old infant, and the UN has – UNICEF, WHO, the partners in the Global Pandemic Eradication Initiative have

really put a big push on now in the micro planning for two campaigns that's intended to vaccinate 640,000 children under 10 through two cycles of mass vaccination, dependent on ceasefires, a temporary cessation, a one-week temporary cessation for each campaign.

The numbers are pretty impressive – 1.6 million vaccines; moving in an entire system of cold-chain freezers to manage this; 2,700 people trained; 700 sites. It's very, very ambitious. And obviously the threat is that, if unchecked – and this is the very vocal argument made – if unchecked, not only will you have large numbers of unprotected children and older folks contract polio and all of the consequences for how that impacts their lives, but it will be exported into the surrounding region, including Israel.
So how, if at all, has this development affected the internal debate within Israel around seeing this common epidemiological family, but seeing these shared – these threats that can easily jump borders? Israel had a case last year of importation of polio, which they managed very well, as I recall.

But over to you, Dahlia.

Dr. Scheindlin: Yeah, I think that in some ways the best debate is no debate in Israel, because, you know, the moment it gets into the public discourse, it's going to be politicized. And we're already seeing the prime minister backtracking and trying to confuse the issue about whether there is – whether there are localized pauses in the fighting in Gaza in order to help with that campaign.

He can't tolerate that he might be seen as doing what is clearly the right thing by his far-right-wing base, who will see it as some sort of, you know, gift to Hamas, which is – you know, again, it's hard to make that connection because it's so completely untethered from reality. But Israelis – I've been surprised, honestly, since the traces of polio were found in the sewage, that Israeli – to see Israelis both reporting on the issue – I mean, it has been reported, I would say, fairly. It has been reported in some mainstream press. I wouldn't say huge or extensive coverage, but enough that Israelis should know about it.

And, you know, there has been – there was a major statement by a number of public-health officials and public-health experts in Israel – maybe not officials, actually, I should say – experts and academics and policy types – to call for a ceasefire in order to mitigate this threat. But at the very same time, we see right wingers say, oh, you know – basically trivializing it and saying, well, come on, it's just – you know, they're just finding it in the sewage; that can happen anywhere – without ever actually naming the reality that the war has devastated,

you know, the wash facilities, right, health and – water, health and sanitation facilities, and devastated the regular vaccine programs of children to the point where you have extremely vulnerable populations, as if that's not going to affect Israel.

Now, Israel may have its infrastructure intact, but Israel has unvaccinated populations as well. There are anti, you know, vaccine communities in Israel. That's why we've had measles outbreaks in the past. You know, those communities were hard hit by COVID. And it's really an amazing capacity to shut down the reality that simply doesn't understand the political ideological perspective of the public. And as a result, I think the issue just hasn't taken on great significance in the Israeli public discourse.

And if the government does want to facilitate these vaccination programs by pausing the fighting in certain areas, it's going to have – I think that it's probably best to do it without having too much attention to it. Again, nobody should hide it. It should be transparent. It's sad to think that we're in a situation that you have to downplay the conversation about it. But the government can do this if it wants to.

And I don't see that this issue has actually kind of penetrated front and center in the Israeli discourse either way up until now. It's really just, you know, activists either on the public-health side or on the really, really far right, which characterizes a lot more Israelis than in the past, who could possibly, you know, oppose these kinds of vaccination efforts and efforts to mitigate the spread of polio.

I mean, I think also, you know, maybe people's historic memory about what polio really is isn't so strong. Maybe they just don't internalize what a threat this can actually be. Israel has, again, very high vaccination rates, but, you know, vaccine – a virus – polio will find its way if there are unvaccinated populations. And conditions in Gaza are about as poor as they can be.

Dr. Morrison: Well, I have a couple of fears on this polio issue. One is that it comes in the midst of the worst and most toxic confrontation between the Israeli government and U.N. leadership, I mean at the highest levels. They are in a daily slugfest through the media. It's been ongoing. There's been – it's just been relentless. Second thing is that the fighting is in a very intense escalatory phase, and so – which is tied to all sorts of other things, including the negotiations process, the desire for both sides to exact maximum gains and maximum harm against their adversary. Third, that the threat of a widened war involving Lebanon and Iran is fully in front of us.

I just fear that this argument that the professionals who are leading the charge at UNICEF and WHO and elsewhere – they're making very powerful arguments. They're showing very great determination to move forward. They have the backing of the secretary-general and others. But I just fear that the – that they're not going to rise sufficiently as a priority in this particular period, given all of these other factors, and we need some strategy that addresses that. You know, I'm very won over by the – by the arguments that are being made about what needs to happen to stem this threat, and benefit both Palestinians and everyone in the region. But I'm skeptical, given what I've just said, that we're going to see any solution any time soon. What are your thoughts, Dahlia? Am I being overly pessimistic?

Dr. Scheindlin: Well, I mean, I guess the question is what kind of solution are you expecting. I mean, are you asking whether this Israeli government will, you know, develop – will agree to emergency public health measures that are being carried out in cooperation with these international organizations? I think, like everything, this Israeli government is definitely going to take the worst possible steps. Will it – will it reject any kind of partnership like that? No, but it will do the minimum possible because it simply does not – it is willing to sacrifice the well-being, absolutely, of Israelis, and needless to say Palestinians, and I would say it would do that just not to be accused of cooperating with these bodies, which Israelis have become convinced – because the government has been telling them so for many, many years – that they're all against Israel somehow. This is one of the biggest fictions of Israeli life. It's a complete myth that the international community targets Israel. And that attitude, however, is sort of applied to every international organization, even humanitarian organizations.

But having said that, again, I think that even this government knows how to undertake those kinds of practical actions when needed if they want to do it in a way that is understated politically. And so – and I do think that this government is afraid of the international courts. I do think they are – Netanyahu himself, I think, is concerned by, you know, the request of the special – of the prosecutor at the International Criminal Court for – on charges of war crimes. And the ICJ, maybe they don't pay as much attention, but they know that – I think that someone like Netanyahu generally has a series of calculations, and one of those calculations is Israel's international position in addition to his primarily domestic calculations. And if he wants to, he can allow – again, it will probably be the minimum possible levels of coordination.

But also, I guess the one area of optimism is that Netanyahu does not have to be prime minister forever. His governments don't have to win forever. And even if I can – you know, if I have been pointing out a slight

recovery in his polling dynamics over the last few months, you know, ultimately, for the entire time that this government has been in office it has essentially lost its majority well before the war, at least in survey research. This particular government, which is among, you know, really the most extreme right-wing fanatic – and you know, that's a sort of normative judgment, but it is also among the least practical. I mean, it's been the biggest failure in pretty much every area of Israeli policy, from security – you know, from security with regards to Hamas but also with regards to internal security and – you know, and economic life. In so many ways it's been a disastrous failure, which is part of the reason why it has not been able to retain the kind of majority that it won in 2022 in surveys well before October 7th. And even with this slight recovery over the last number of months it just has gone back to where it was before the war, which is, you know, still not able to win elections.

And so it's hard to say exactly. We don't know when elections will be held. I've never been confident because Israelis – you know, anything can happen. They could reelect this government. But there is also a possibility – and according to surveys, more of a possibility – that Israel will elect a different kind of government. I would not want to promise anybody that it will be a left-wing government; that would be completely ungrounded in reality. It probably won't even be a centrist government. But even of a government that is what Israelis see as ideologically right wing, but which puts pragmatic concerns first as opposed to theological concerns, as opposed to expansionist concerns, as opposed to populist kind of incitement of the Israeli – some of the Israeli coalition partners. Even a government that's right wing can do a lot better, because even the right wing can say – it can look at citizens in the face and say you deserve to be protected from polio.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

Part of what I was trying to get at is if those who are pushing for the polio vaccination campaigns don't succeed in getting seven-day pauses across Gaza, perhaps there are options that – where the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, would figure out how to break this problem down into smaller geographic-component elements. I don't know exactly.

But there were periods back in the March-April timeframe, before the May Rafah – the southern campaign began, when IDF was making announcements about pauses that they were enacted in different parts of Gaza in order to facilitate the passage of humanitarian assistance. And this showed the kind of thing that you were talking about where you don't talk about it too much but you don't deny it – you don't hide it – but very pragmatic steps being taken that look responsible, that are responsible, and that are helpful.

And we saw, back in March, a significant improvement, a significant improvement in humanitarian access for a brief – for a month period that was through a concentrated effort. I'm just trying to get back to, OK, we know that there's escalating fighting. We know there's a widening war. We know that there's this slugfest between the leadership of the U.N. and the Israeli government. But perhaps there's still a window, a possibility, for some cooperation in creating pauses that would permit a polio vaccination campaign to move ahead.

Dr. Scheindlin: I think there is that possibility. Again, I don't want to – you know, I really can't speak to or predict what the government will decide in terms of whether and how that should happen. But it's certainly possible. And I do think that this government is capable of doing that politically, again, as we've seen on occasion, as you just pointed out. So, I mean, I cannot say whether that is the plan, but it is certainly politically possible. It is certainly militarily possible.

And I would just be cautious of one thing, one thing that I have been noticing since early this year – I think from about January – is that because of the humanitarian crisis, including – of course, it goes way beyond public – you know, way beyond a question of disease control. It's a matter also of food distribution, you know, basic humanitarian needs beyond just vaccines.

And one of the things is that this government will capitalize, even on that kind of thing, for advancing its political aims. So we have, you know, the minister of finance, Bezalel Smotrich, who represents really one of the most – the most extreme party in Israel today, Religious Zionism. Together with Jewish Power, they are the most extreme parties in the coalition. He's the minister of finance and minister of – effectively minister of settlements. They don't call him that, but that's what he is. I also call him the minister of annexation. But never mind.

His great idea was to have the IDF actually distribute humanitarian aid. And when asked, you know, how would the IDF actually take responsibility for distributing humanitarian aid – this is back in January; you can easily just add, you know, vaccine campaign onto that – his answer was, mark my words, there will be a military government in Gaza.

So I would just say all these things are possible, but always be on the lookout for the government's political aims behind even what it might present as a pragmatic need that conforms to what the international community would want. And that's not a reason not to do it, because, you know, a meeting of interests can be fine in the immediate sense that

these vaccines are desperately needed, as is distribution of, you know, food, water and shelter and, you know, everything we know. But I would just – I think that everybody has to be aware that this government will find a way to capitalize on those things politically for the long term, to the extent possible.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you. Thank you, Dahlia.

I want to close on two questions for you. One is, what needs to happen in order to better understand and track the opinion climate in Israel, in your view? Like, what is missing? What is missing that you would – in an ideal world, what are the things that would happen in order to bring greater visibility and understanding around these issues that we've been talking about here?

And the closing question to you is – it tracks with some of what we've been talking about, which is where's the hope in this storyline? We don't want to end on an overly dark moment. And you've done a lot in encouraging people to think constructively about the future, which I think is very important.

So just speak to those two things, please, and then we'll close.

Dr. Scheindlin: Well, if you're – if I understood your first question, the idea was how do we raise awareness of this issue, this – you know, the health crisis and the need for disease prevention in Gaza among the Israeli public. Is that what you were trying to get at?

Dr. Morrison: Well, if you're – if I understood your first question, the idea was how do we raise awareness of this issue, this – you know, the health crisis and the need for disease prevention in Gaza among the Israeli public. Is that what you were trying to get at?

Dr. Scheindlin: Put it this way. I think there's, you know, an abundance of data about Israeli public opinion on numerous themes but not that much on Israeli attitudes towards the humanitarian situation and what it actually means and to the level that it might affect Israel and whether – you know, what do Israelis know about the chain reaction of cutting off water because it makes them feel like, you know, it satisfies their vindictive – you know, the vindictive side versus what that means in terms of disease spread in Gaza that could eventually affect Israelis.

That's where we don't have a lot of data. We have tons of data on the war and on politics and on the hostage release deal but not so much on this issue. And I guess what I would say is for one thing I don't think salvation is going to come from the Israeli public. This needs to be

driven by leadership. Leadership needs to make the case. Either do it or convince the Israeli public and do it. Either way.

But I think that nobody should wait for the Israeli public to come around. Having said that, I do think that it is – these are some very intuitive arguments. You know, the facts are so overwhelmingly supportive of doing better public health efforts in Gaza, and if people can't handle it for moral reasons right now because Israelis are so wounded and, you know, traumatized and going through their own difficulties with the war then simply for a matter of pragmatic self-interest – I mean, I'm sorry that it has to be put like that but this is the reality in wartime.

The case is so overwhelming that I think that those factors need to be laid out for Israelis, and then I would like to see how they can be crafted in a way that makes them extremely clear and convincing for Israelis.

That's the kind of thing that survey research can do. But, again, I don't think anybody should wait for the Israeli public to come around on that. In terms of where the hope is, listen, I mean, I can't invent optimism. It's a very, very difficult time. The political environment is, frankly, unforgiving on the Israeli side. On the Palestinian side, there's a lack of leadership, a lack of legitimacy for the leadership, and certainly in wartime it's impossible to think about these things.

However, I will say the fact that there are active communities in civil society among both Israelis and Palestinians who are – you know, who realize that the situation is so dramatically awful that there's very little to do now but who are still committed and maybe even more so to working in partnership both for pragmatic and urgent and long-term need, and because that is more optimistic – recognizing shared interests rather than just expecting people to want to like each other, recognizing that there is a very extensive interdependence both on public health but on environment, resources, climate change, economy, security, and that cooperation and partnership does a lot better at not only managing and containing some of those tensions but also flourishing, than creating more walls, more isolation, cutting off communities from one another.

I want to remind people that for years we had been saying things like it's sad that Israelis and Palestinians don't know each other. Wow. Twenty, 30, years ago everybody knew somebody, you know, between Israelis and Palestinians.

I don't like to over romanticize the nature of those relationships but, you know, with the second intifada and then the construction of the separation wall and then the closure of Gaza, really, Palestinians and

Israelis are much more isolated than ever and this is the phase when we've seen very severe rising and accelerating violence, and the worst violence in this entire region came out of the area that was most hermetically sealed, Gaza.

I think that should be a lesson to everybody which is – you know, it ended in tragedy and it's still going on but it also gives me hope that a political framework that is built around structures of partnership and cooperation with certain shared institutions over shared needs that can rise above politics because they simply are so clearly mutually interdependent and mutually beneficial I think we may have more of an opportunity to recognize that and the damage that's been done by artificial separation under an asymmetric balance of power.

Dr. Morrison: Dahlia, thank you. This has been a terrifically rich, illuminating conversation and thank you for making the time and thank you for all the work that you do, and I hope we can stay in touch and revisit some of these issues as we move towards the end of the year and into next year.

So thank you. We're very, very grateful that you'd make so much time and be with us today and be so open and candid.

We will –

Dr. Scheindlin: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about this.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

So we are going to post this video on the CSIS homepage, CSIS.org. You can find it there. In a few hours we will post the transcript from this, and it will be attached to that – to that link.
Thank you for joining us to the audience, and please look for those links. And we will see you again soon in our next episode. Thank you.

(END.)