

# How Israel Can Leverage Its Successes (Yes, Successes)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**Despite massive failures leading up to the Gaza war and numerous controversies since then, Israel has made important achievements—now it must connect them to a clearly stated set of realistic strategic goals.**

**T**hroughout its year-long multifront war starting on October 7, 2023, Israel has seen its share of successes and failures. Given the shock of that day and the extraordinary nature of the war that unfolded in its wake, it is no surprise that failures have garnered the most attention. Political posturing notwithstanding, Israel has a proud tradition of investigating its blunders, and a commission of inquiry will most likely be established largely focusing on the intelligence failure leading up to the devastating breach (although missteps that weakened international support should also be scrutinized).

However, no accounting of the past year will be complete without focusing on some of Israel's successes. Israel scored major achievements in its regional relationships, operational military performance, superpower backing, and the resilience of its citizenry—arenas that are critical to Israel's ability to remain powerful at home and abroad.

Despite the scorn heaped upon Israel in Arabic media for the scope and duration of the war in Gaza, not one of the five Arab states with ties to Israel—Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco—broke ties. (While some temporarily recalled their ambassadors, this is a symbolic maneuver employed during various diplomatic crises and a far cry from cutting ties.)

Moreover, Jordan and Saudi Arabia were part of the US-led coalition working with Israel to thwart the 300 projectiles Iran launched on April 13-14, even if none of these Arab countries issued a statement confirming their participation in the effort. During last week's October 1 strike, in which an estimated 200 ballistic missiles were fired at Israel from Iran, Jordan issued a public statement saying they were part of the effort to ensure Iranian missiles did not enter its airspace.

Despite all the anger in the Arab world about the war in Gaza, Biden Administration officials publicly remain hopeful that normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel remains possible. The Biden Administration initially viewed a hostage/cease-fire deal as the pathway toward normalization. However, it seems administration officials do not see Israel as so politically isolated that normalization is unachievable, even if it cannot happen during the fighting.

Moreover, the recent Israeli fighting against Hezbollah has highlighted the deep schism within Lebanon. Aside from Hezbollah's staunch supporters, the war has underscored what many Lebanese believe: that Hezbollah has brought only ruin to the country. In the [Arab Barometer survey \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/lebanon/what-lebanese-people-really-think-hezbollah?utm\\_campaign=tw\\_daily\\_soc&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter\\_posts\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/lebanon/what-lebanese-people-really-think-hezbollah?utm_campaign=tw_daily_soc&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_posts) taken in July, only 30% of the Lebanese people surveyed said they had quite a lot or a great deal of trust in Hezbollah and 55% said they had no trust at all.

The lack of trust in Hezbollah is even lower among sectarian groups in Lebanon like the Sunnis and Druze, of which only 9% say they have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in Hezbollah. Further, only 6% of the Christian population says the same. Many Lebanese blame Iran for hollowing out Lebanon, allowing a non-state actor to surpass the state in military power. Only [36% of Lebanese people \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/lebanon/what-lebanese-people-really-think-hezbollah?utm\\_campaign=tw\\_daily\\_soc&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter\\_posts\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/lebanon/what-lebanese-people-really-think-hezbollah?utm_campaign=tw_daily_soc&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_posts) hold a favorable or somewhat favorable view of Iran, and this number is significantly lower among non-Shiite respondents. The antidote to Hezbollah's reign of terror is the restoration of strong state institutions within Lebanon that could enforce a border deal with Israel, though whether such a restoration is achievable given the current political realities remains uncertain.

Hezbollah's military strength has preserved its dominance in Lebanon. However, after Israel decapitated the top tier of Hezbollah leadership and destroyed an estimated half of its rockets, the group's direction and sway over Lebanon is no longer certain. Without leadership within the organization, Hezbollah fighters lack direction. In an interesting break from the past, Naim Qassem, a key Hezbollah leader, publicly called for an unconditional ceasefire on Tuesday. Another veteran Lebanese leader, Walid Jumblatt, suddenly called for Lebanon to name a president, a position that has been vacant for two years amid differences with Hezbollah, in an apparent effort to now focus on Lebanese sovereign institutions.

## Deterrence Restored

**T**aken together, Israel's operational successes have led to the belief that Israel's vaunted deterrence, shattered last October 7, has been restored in no small measure. While that day may have been the worst intelligence failure in Israel's history, its anniversary comes at a time when Israel has reached peak operational intelligence success, having decimated Hezbollah's top leadership and thousands of operatives through intelligence gathered from pagers and walkie-talkies. Some analysts have equated Israel's killing of Hassan Nasrallah, who has terrorized Israel in his Hezbollah leadership capacity for more than 30 years, as the biggest unalloyed Israeli victory on par with the 1976 rescue of Israeli hostages in Entebbe.

On the war's southern front, Israel has had considerable success as well. Hamas cannot fire at Israeli population centers as it has in the past, apart from a few symbolic strikes. The Iranian-armed and trained Hamas military force has been reduced to a terror group, as it was in the past. Hamas linchpins like Mohammad Deif, Marwan Issa, and Ismail Haniyeh have been eliminated. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [said \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/gallant-hamas-as-military-formation-in-gaza-is-gone-now-only-guerrilla-warfare/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/gallant-hamas-as-military-formation-in-gaza-is-gone-now-only-guerrilla-warfare/) in September, "Hamas as a military formation no longer exists. Hamas is engaged in guerrilla warfare and we are still fighting Hamas terrorists and pursuing Hamas leadership."

As for the two Iranian attacks, whatever success the Islamic Republic may claim, the [figures](#)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c70w1j0l488o>) tell a different story. The April attack caused a single Israeli injury, and last week's assault killed one person, a Palestinian in Jericho.

On the US front, it is no small achievement—largely by Washington but also due to strong relationships between the security establishments—that the US has maintained its military support for Israel over the last year. Biden was the first American president to visit Israel during wartime and dispatched two air carrier groups. Moreover, [\\$14 billion in aid \(https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3754718/supplemental-bill-becomes-law-provides-billions-in-aid-for-ukraine-israel-taiwan/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3754718/supplemental-bill-becomes-law-provides-billions-in-aid-for-ukraine-israel-taiwan/) to Israel was supported largely by both parties in Congress. Attacks by progressives, right-wing isolationists, and a plethora of campus demonstrations have not achieved their goal of halting US military aid to Israel. Although President Biden is [withholding some heavy bombs \(https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/biden-administration-pauses-ammunition-shipments-israel-us-officials/story?id=109993270\)](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/biden-administration-pauses-ammunition-shipments-israel-us-officials/story?id=109993270), most of the weaponry continues to flow.

## Self-Criticism as Resilience

All the above suggests that Israel has achieved a lot. Israel's operational military successes have been dazzling. Its ties with key Arab players have been tested but so far have proven resilient. Israel's relationship with the world's superpower, the US, has reinforced Israel's status as the dominant regional military power and conveys to all Mideast leaders—Ayatollah Khamenei and Yahyeh Sinwar notwithstanding—that Israel is in the region to stay.

Arab states know that Israel's success can be found in the country's ability to come together during military crises, with soaring levels of reserve duty participation, and repel its enemies. The past has also taught them that Israel self-corrects with brutal honesty about its shortcomings via commissions of inquiry or changes in government. This is its DNA. No less than Israel's military prowess, Arab states see Israel's ability to be self-critical as central to its resilience in the Middle East. Taken together, military successes, regional relationships, superpower backing, and inner resilience are all central to Israel's ability to project power internally and abroad.

At the same time, these achievements, necessary as they may be, are not sufficient. They need to be matched by strategic direction toward realistic goals put forward by Israel's political leadership: What is the “day after” plan for Gaza? Who will provide enforcement to make sure Hezbollah does not remain on the border in southern Lebanon and terrorize Israel? What mechanisms ensure that Israel and Iran will not engage in an open-ended war of attrition? How can the Saudi-Israeli normalization channel be reactivated to create a strategic turning point and build a regional coalition against Iran? What is to be done about the West Bank so the current Israeli-Palestinian fighting doesn't continue, and where even incremental moves provide the possibility for coexistence down the road? Critically, what is the way to get the 101 hostages back, as failure to do so would haunt Israel for many years to come?

In short, the successes over the last year are key to strategic success. Failure to connect the two imperils those successes. As US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on October 7th, “it takes real discipline, it takes courage, it takes foresight to match the conduct of war to a clear and sustainable set of objectives and to turn tactical advantages into enduring strategic gains,” adding that the US would work with Israel to achieve these gains.

It was the 19th-century British poet [Matthew Arnold](https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00000472)

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00000472>) who said that he “saw life steadily and saw it whole.” There is much to criticize as Israel looks back over the last year, but Israel is not as fragile as it may seem. Now more than ever, it is important for Israel to understand its successes as a springboard to a better, more stable future.

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