

# Netanyahu Is Playing Into Khamenei's Hands

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Sep 13, 2024

Also published in *Foreign Policy*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

## Iran's leaders are playing a long game; Israel's leaders are not.

Iran makes no secret of its commitment to seek Israel's destruction. Its strategy is to keep it under constant pressure and consume it in ongoing conflicts on its borders. While that is plain to see, Israel's current approach seems, ironically, to be playing into Iran's hands.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has long assumed that Israelis will leave the country if they feel constantly under pressure from military threats. What some refer to as a "ring of fire" around Israel is driven by this assumption.

It doesn't matter so much whether Khamenei and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah are wrong—after all, Israelis, even with all their disagreements, have demonstrated unmistakably that they will fight for their country and remain in it. What matters is that Khamenei and Nasrallah believe so and are designing their military strategy accordingly—and to its detriment, Israel's government is falling into their trap.

Nasrallah said (<https://resistancenews.org/2024/01/19/nasrallah-october-7-foreshadows-the-liberation-of-all-palestine/>) in a January speech that Israelis are not rooted in the land and under pressure, they will flee it.

Khamenei has said (<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/06/04/726821/Leader-Imam-Khomeini-Palestine-Al-Aqsa-Storm-President-Raeisi->) "reverse migration" would spell the end of Israel.

According to this logic, the two leaders believe the appropriate long-term strategy is forcing Israel to fight on all fronts: in Gaza, on its northern border with Lebanon, and in the West Bank, especially with Iranian arms, explosives, and money being smuggled into all of these theaters—provided, of course, that this does not draw Iran directly into a conflict and does not cost the Islamic Republic its most important proxy, Hezbollah. If there were any lingering doubts about Iran's desire to avoid all-out wars, they should be removed in the aftermath of the Israeli targeted

killing of Fuad Shukr, arguably the second-most important figure in Hezbollah, and the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, the political head of Hamas. While both Khamenei and Nasrallah promised there would be a “harsh response” and Israel would pay a high price for these acts, they have so far avoided acting in a way that could trigger escalation. When Hezbollah finally responded, Nasrallah claimed (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1422838/the-us-pushes-for-diplomatic-efforts-nasrallah-set-to-speak-tonight-day-305-of-the-gaza-war.html>) a great success (to avoid doing more), even though he was derided on Arab social media for his claims.

While Khamenei and Nasrallah haven’t backed their retaliation threats with deeds, they are intent on keeping Israel under constant pressure and consumed by wars of attrition. Indeed, wearing Israel down in quagmires that cost it militarily and isolate it politically on the world stage is the core of Iran’s strategy. As Khamenei (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/10664/Gaza-has-shown-legitimacy-of-creation-of-Resistance-Front>) argued in March, Israel is “suffering a crisis” because the “entry of the Zionist regime in Gaza created a quagmire for it. If it comes out of Gaza today, it will have failed. And if it doesn’t come out, it will also have failed.”

Israel’s current policies are validating the Iranian strategy. Israel is now fighting wars of attrition in Gaza, on its northern border, and increasingly with larger forays into the West Bank. Each in isolation might make sense, but collectively, they amount to playing on Iran’s terms.

This is not to argue that Israel should seek all-out wars now with Hezbollah or Iran. But Israel needs a new strategy.

This is easier said than done. It would require a number of difficult but necessary decisions by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Biden administration. The next U.S. president should be prepared to take steps that make some of these hard choices easier to rationalize.

For Israel, such a strategy must start with ending the war in Gaza. The Biden administration is trying to facilitate that by reaching a hostage deal that sets in motion a path to a permanent cease-fire. Unfortunately, it makes Haniyeh’s replacement, Yahya Sinwar, the arbiter of whether there can be a deal, even assuming Netanyahu is serious about doing a hostage deal, which many Israelis doubt.

While I hope the U.S.-led efforts succeed, there should be a plan B in which the focus is on ending the war to get the hostages released as opposed to getting a hostage deal to end the war. For this, Netanyahu needs to be able, credibly, to claim success based on dismantling the Hamas military, destroying much of its military infrastructure (weapons depots, weapons labs, weapons production facilities, and tunnels), and ensuring an end to smuggling to prevent Hamas from being able to reconstitute itself. Israel is very close to achieving this, having dismantled both Hamas as a military force and much of its military infrastructure as well.

Netanyahu’s focus on Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor is not wrong because there must be an end to the smuggling aboveground and below it there; however, his answer of keeping the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) there is wrong because there are alternatives to an Israeli presence and such a presence will cost him what he also wants, which is an alternative to Hamas rule in Gaza—the real proof of Israeli victory.

Egypt, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries are prepared on an interim basis to administer Gaza alongside non-Hamas Palestinians and provide security—but not if Israel remains in Gaza, and Netanyahu has repeatedly said he does not want that. The Biden administration can help prevent smuggling by providing new scanning technologies and committing to help finance an underground barrier to tunnels and arrange for the presence of Emirati forces along with specially trained and equipped security contractors policing the corridor.

If Netanyahu declares an end to the war if the hostages are released, Sinwar would face enormous pressure not just from Arabs but from Palestinians to release them—in no small part as this has been Hamas’s condition all along. Yes, there would still be negotiations on the sequence, the pace of IDF withdrawals and Palestinian prisoners, but the

entire context would change, and Israel would be able to claim the high ground politically and tell its citizens that it's ending the war on its terms.

Israel could then address the northern border. Nasrallah has made it very clear that he will stop firing into Israel if there is a cease-fire in Gaza—that would set the stage for working out a deal that would allow both Israeli and Lebanese citizens to return to their homes on both sides of the border. Even if Iran might prefer the war of attrition to continue there, Nasrallah does not, given the price paid by Hezbollah's Shiite base in southern Lebanon, where roughly 100,000 Lebanese have had to evacuate their homes.

The 60,000 evacuated Israelis will return home only if they feel certain that Hezbollah forces and weapons will not return to the border. There is no simple way to guarantee this—U.N. peacekeepers in the country and the Lebanese Army have proved that they will not prevent Hezbollah from doing anything or going anywhere. But there is one thing the United States could do to deter Hezbollah from violating such an understanding: make a commitment to back Israel, rhetorically and with resupply, as it acts, including on the ground, should Hezbollah move any forces back toward the border.

Rather than simply saying that Washington could not prevent the Israelis from acting, Nasrallah needs to know that the United States will back the Israeli move if Hezbollah violates the agreement. Nasrallah understands the consequences of an all-out war, and Hezbollah is the one proxy Iran is not prepared to sacrifice.

As for what is increasingly a third front, the West Bank, Israel can't simply pursue a punitive policy. The IDF's current operations there will succeed in destroying bomb-making labs and killing and arresting wanted terrorists—and like its previous forays, Israel will have to keep repeating these operations.

There is a significant Iranian effort to smuggle arms and explosives in and to pay large numbers of unemployed younger Palestinians to carry out acts of terrorism against Israel—and that must be cut off. Most of the smuggling is coming across the Jordanian border into the West Bank and originates in Syria. Jordan makes an effort to stop it but lacks the technology and manpower to do the job—and here, again, there is a U.S. role to play by providing technology, drones, and even personnel.

But Israel must also address the fertile ground that Iran is exploiting in the West Bank. It should allow vetted Palestinians again to work in Israel—something that would greatly reduce unemployment; stop withholding taxes it collects for the Palestinians to ease the deep economic stress of the Palestinian Authority, which is paying only 50 percent salaries to its employees, including its security forces; and crack down harder on violence coming from Jewish settlers.

So long as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, the messianic nationalists in the current Israeli government, are able to shape Israeli policies toward the West Bank, little can change. They want the PA to collapse—and that would leave a vacuum in the West Bank, one the Iranians would welcome and are only too happy to fill.

Palestinians also need hope that they have a future and that secular non-Islamists and non-rejectionists can provide it. The Saudis can play a larger role in helping to provide a political vision for the Palestinians, something that is also necessary to prevent further radicalization in the West Bank. The Saudis, the Biden administration, and Netanyahu all continue to be interested in a Saudi-Israeli normalization deal.

For their part, the Saudis demand a defense treaty with the United States and what they call a credible pathway toward a Palestinian state. The Biden administration is ready to finalize the defense treaty and present it to the U.S. Senate after the election, but a credible pathway to a Palestinian state requires an adjustment in Israeli policy.

Since Hamas's attack on Oct. 7, 2023, the Israeli public, not just Netanyahu, has been leery of Palestinian statehood. The Israelis are right to want to know that a Palestinian state cannot and will not be led by Hamas or rejectionists

and that the identity of Palestinians will be based on coexistence with Israel, not resistance.

Of course, no credible pathway to a state is possible if Israel can continue to act on the ground in a way that makes a Palestinian state impossible. Netanyahu must therefore choose Saudi normalization over the messianic nationalists in his government. In the near term, that means choosing U.S. President Joe Biden over Ben-Gvir.

Biden might make that easier by offering more than just a defense treaty to the Saudis as part of the normalization deal. The Israeli ethos of always defending itself by itself is understandable given Israeli history, but on the night of April 13, when U.S. forces—with British, French, and Arab partners—intercepted many of the drones and cruise missiles launched by Iran, Israel was not defending itself alone. Because Iran does not want to get into a direct conflict with the United States, it could be time for a formal U.S.-Israeli defense treaty as well.

What I am calling for would constitute a daunting agenda for any Israeli government. But consider the threat that Iran and its proxies pose, and consider also the one issue Netanyahu has always defined as his special, historic mission: defending Israel from Iran. Currently, Netanyahu's government is validating the Iranian approach, not undermining it.

The fact that Iran has demonstrated that it does not want direct conflict—certainly not with the United States—should underpin the collective strategy that Washington must take the lead in implementing. But Israel has a role to play, and its own interests dictate that it should weaken rather than bolster Iran's long-term strategy.

*Dennis Ross, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, formerly served in senior national security positions with the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama administrations. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/13/netanyahu-israel-iran-hezbollah-khamenei-nasrallah-long-game/>). ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### Israel and the Coming Long War

Sep 13, 2024

◆  
Assaf Orion

(/policy-analysis/israel-and-coming-long-war)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Hamas Is Weakened, But a Prolonged Guerrilla Conflict Looms

Sep 12, 2024



Ido Levy

(/policy-analysis/hamas-weakened-prolonged-guerrilla-conflict-looms)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Hamas's Misleading Narrative and Its Impact on Jordanian National Security

Sep 12, 2024



Saud Al-Sharafat

(/policy-analysis/hamass-misleading-narrative-and-its-impact-jordanian-national-security)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)