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PANEL DISCUSSION

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SACHS: Good morning, everyone, and good afternoon for wherever you're listening. Thank you very much for joining us this morning for our Brookings Center for Middle East Policy events analyzing Israel's strategy in Gaza. It's been a harrowing few months since October 7th, and this is part of our ongoing programming on the various aspects of this event. I'd like to note straight up, to everyone to please join us on February 5th, we will have a special panel on Palestinian politics and society after the war, which I think we'll take a very interesting look at what Palestinian society and politics might look like after the devastation of Gaza and everything that's happened. Now, today we're looking at the Israeli strategy, and we're going to try to understand the Israeli response to the shock of the horrific attacks of October 7th and the ongoing war. Delighted. I hate to say that word these days, but I am delighted to be joined by three absolutely expert, experts. And, will give us different, takes on this, these topics. First, Audrey Kurth Cronin, who is the Trustees Professor of Security, Technology and technology and the director of the Carnegie Mellon Institute's Institute for Strategy and Technology. She is very well known, for her book, "How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns." That was a, The New Yorker called "landmark study" and I can say is is very well known and very important in the study of terrorism. Her latest book, "Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists" could hardly be more relevant, to today, not only to the topic we're discussing, but to all similar kinds of threats. She's had a long and very distinguished academic career, but also one here in Washington. She served in the State and the the Department of Defense, with the office of the Secretary of Defense and frequently advisors advises everyone here. Excuse me. We are also delighted to be joined by an operator who's joining us, actually from Washington D.C. Eyal Hulata is the former National Security Advisor of the State of Israel and the government of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. He is now a Senior International Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies FDD here in Washington, and its first foreign visiting fellow here at the headquarters. He had a very long and distinguished career in the Israeli security establishment and later in, high tech in the Israeli, technological scene. He is a graduate of the elite technological program Talpiot, which is very well known in Israel. With a bachelor in physics from the Hebrew University and a PhD from Tel Aviv University. As well as a master's from Harvard Kennedy. And Shashank Joshi is very well known, I think, to everyone, here, is the Economist defence editor, defence with a c not an s, he prior to joining the Economist in 2018, he was a senior research fellow at the at RUSI, a very well known and long, long standing research think tank in, in London. And he was a research associate at Oxford University. He has published books on Iran's nuclear program and in on India's armed forces, and is obviously one of the most important and influential, excuse me, influential voices on military affairs in the past couple of years, certainly on the Ukraine, on Ukraine, and the last two, three months also, on the topics we're discussing today. We have a lot to cover today, so I'll try to get straight to it and try to stay out of things. Shashank I want I wonder if we can start with you, your, journalist hat for a moment on, tell us a little bit where we stand. Obviously, it's been an extremely eventful few months. Where does the campaign start right now in terms of the Israeli strategy? What phase are they in? Give a give us the very brief, up to date, please.

JOSHI: Great. And good morning, everyone. Thanks so much for having me here. I'd say we're we're sort of entering, almost month three of this campaign. If you look, focus on the ground maneuver phase. And in that phase, what's been achieved, I would say the results are mixed. Some some positive for Israel, some less so. According to public estimates, they have, killed around 20, 20, 30% of Hamas's ground forces, of their combat force, and in addition, perhaps wounded 10 to 15,000, of whom maybe half would be unlikely to return to the battlefield. But of course, we ought to be wary of judging a campaign by any crude body count measures, on and assuming that this indicates strategic success. We certainly haven't seen any very senior Hamas leaders killed, other than, of course, the strike that took place in Beirut about a few weeks ago. On the tunnels, which were, of course, this this vital center of gravity for this campaign, the tunnels and the destruction of the tunnels was was one of the objectives. The IDF is estimated to have destroyed probably less than half of the tunnels, which is which is hardly surprising given their extent and given the difficulty of destroying these things. They probably destroyed about 1000 so far, according to our best available estimates. But we're seeing just how difficult it is to locate and destroy these. Rocket fire has been suppressed. But of course, that's a temporary effect. And we would expect that Hamas would be able to, recover a portion of their arsenal and resume fire if the Israelis were to withdraw today so that's a very temporary suppression. But of course, the biggest and most stark problem in this campaign is the failure thus far to recover substantial numbers of hostages other than those recovered through the truce. And I think increasingly we saw this in the, public comments by by Eisenkot, a week ago or about ten days ago, that the contradictions in this campaign between the military objective of destroying Hamas, the political objective of recovering hostages, and the diplomatic constraints of satisfying the U.S. and other allies and partners, they are beginning to become more acute. And I think we're seeing some of those difficulties manifest today. So I'll stop there. Natan, I'm happy to go into more details, but I'll I'll pause for a second.

SACHS: Thank you very much, Shashank. And we'll get also to the other fronts, including the northern front in a bit. But Eyal I wonder if we could turn to you, and if you could give us a little bit of a sense of the Israeli objectives. Certainly early on in the day of October 7th and the few days after that, there was a

lot of muddled talk in Israel about what the objective might be. Could you define for us a little bit how the Israeli government and military understand their objectives, at least in the Gaza Strip.

HULATA: Yeah. Thank you Natan for joining and with such a distinguished panel. Well, as for the objectives, I think, since this came as a complete surprise on October 7th in such a brutal way. The immediate response by the government was to, the goal is to completely eradicate Hamas, from Gaza, the eradication of it. Very strong a word. I think over time, it became more fine tuned to understand what that really means. And going back to, the way Shashank presented it. Of course, body counts is not a metrics for success. A success, will be, that Hamas no longer controls Gaza Strip. But there are conditions to have an alternative, civilian, more pragmatic, solution. They're getting back the hostages is very important. There is a debate in Israel, as was presented before, between the War Cabinet members about the priorities of those issues. But I think ultimately, if I try to talk about it, I would say the Israeli perspective, not necessarily the government. It's very difficult for me to. Talk on behalf of the government. In Israel, I think, what is important. We have to understand that in order to restore not only security, but also a sense of security, in order for the people to come back, to live in the communities around us, in order for people also to come back to the communities of the North. There needs to be an understanding that this cannot happen again. And that would mean, of course, the best way to do this that Hamas no longer controls Gaza. We cannot, continue to conduct such activities. Again, it is true that the suppression of rockets is temporary, but if we are able to secure the Rafah crossing and everything in there in a way that they cannot replenish, that no one in Gaza can replenish and smuggle arms again, this will be a very important way to make sure that this cannot happen again. There are many security considerations, around this. I think what is has been a failing, to progress, unfortunately, with this Israeli government is an aim about the day after, what does this mean to, to recover, Gaza Strip, what does it mean to have a problematic, non radical group ruling in Gaza, which hopefully can, can, can produce security. There's debate about how this could be done. There's debate about if this could be done among the Israeli public, we can get more into that if you want, in the future. But just ultimately, what is clear is that as long as if this war ends and Hamas still controls Gaza they have the ability to replenish and to continue with fire rockets. That means that we not only lost on October 7th, but we haven't created conditions for better security in the future. This is fundamentally the issue, receiving the hostages back and depriving Hamas the capability to do something like this again.

SACHS: Thank you. I'd like to push you a little bit further on the. We'll certainly get to the day after. I'd like to push a little bit further on the immediate day right now. You mentioned the Rafah crossing and the Israel used to call the Philadelphia line between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, the Sinai, which, of course, Israel withdrew from in 2005 and where much of this probably took place. And now we've seen reports of Israel trying to create a buffer zone, as the New York Times called it, along, the east to sort of prevent, the presence of Hamas operatives close to the Israeli, towns and villages, which of course, means the destruction of homes of Gazans as well. Can you tell us a little about the details? Do you expect Israel in the short term, and the military to work to establishment or to establish a presence on the south? Egyptians, of course, voiced, very strong concern about that, this kind of buffer zone. What do you think are the immediate military goals?

HULATA: So first of all, the immediate mandatory goal is, is to, to push and to eliminate as many of Hamas capabilities as as possible. This is not a body count issue. The rockets are important. The infrastructure is important. The industrial base Hamas has built over the years. It's important. And of course, the leaders of Hamas themselves are important because they cannot be replaced. But because if there is, if this, very capable, unfortunately, leadership of Hamas is removed and, new people come in. There is an opportunity for, for various kinds of negotiation that are important in this. So these are the immediate military goals. As for the buffer zone, I certainly believe that we do need to create a more extensive, perimeter. There's already a perimeter on the internal side of Gaza. Of the of the fence. It was very narrow. It was not, Hamas, provoked it, especially in 2023. Less of, so, previously, but there were places where there was very close. Proximity between, a community to the houses on the other side of the border and expect that, to happen. And I think there's also international support for that. As for Rafah and the southern border, this is more tricky. What worries me is that I don't see meaningful and constructive dialog between Israel and Egypt on this. I mean, there is an Egyptian interest as well, to prevent this kind of smuggling. I've never, you know, when I negotiated, talked to I worked with my counterparts in Egypt when I was national security advisor. It was clear for me that this was not in their interest to have all of those weapons smuggled into Gaza. They knew that this will have a toll. We talked about how to do the crossing. We talked about tunnels. We also worked together about, the tunnels. So I'm actually worried about the statements coming from Egypt that I would, think that this is more because of political rift between them and Netanyahu rather than substance. We need to reach an arrangement on the Rafah crossing that is acceptable by the Egyptians, because most of the work that needs to be done needs to happen on the Egyptian side of the border. How the crossing looks like, whether or not we put, a wall underground that, prevents tunnels the way we did in our, part of of

of the of the Gaza border with Israel. Those are the kind of things I would expect happening. And for that we need engagement with Egyptian that is meaningful and constructive.

SACHS: Thank you very much for your order. I'd like to turn to you and take a zoom back a little bit using your your vast kind of experience, not just here, but comparatively. Shashank and Eyal both spoke about two Israeli objectives that that have a tension between them, of course, returning the hostages. And it's a lot of hostages, some of them extremely vulnerable. And removing Hamas as a governing and threatening force in the Gaza Strip. Can you talk first about the tension between the two, but also about the latter, I, I can say myself, I've gotten countless questions since October 7th is it realistic to have Hamas evaporate from the face of the Earth? The answer is no. What is realistic? What? How realistic are these really goals? Can this even be achieved?

CRONIN: I think it is realistic to talk about, ending Hamas, not by which I do not necessarily mean that it evaporates from the face of the Earth, but that it no longer has the kind of popular support and also state support, that has enabled it to get to this point. So, I'm not one to quibble with that as an, as an outcome goal for the Israeli government. I actually think it's not a bad goal. Given the tremendous insecurity and horrible experience of October 7th, the natural need that the Israeli public, requires more more peace, I say yes, do things that would perhaps not eradicate every member of Hamas, but eradicate the ability of Hamas to mobilize behind it. And that is not difficult to do if you use a kind of a strategic approach that is historically grounded. So there is always tension. This is nothing new between the tactical military aims and often the strategic or political aims in any campaign. The problem is to make sure that the military forces and the military actions that are taken serve your strategic ends, your political ends, that you have a diplomatic and informational, a military, yes, but also economic and political approach to achieving your outcome goals. And this is where I think that Israel is not succeeding, because if their goal is to try to eliminate the ability of Hamas to be a fighting force, what they are doing right now is not serving that goal, no matter how many fighters they kill. As, as. As easy it is to talk to, body counts and to look at the kind of progress that the military force is making. I do understand that, but that is strictly a military lens, and you're not necessarily going to increase your political outcome unless you have a better sense of what your outcome should be. On the other side, the Palestinians also are not going to be divided between their support for Hamas and their hope for a peaceful future. That is where I think Israel is losing the informational war right now. And the informational war is just as important, if not potentially more important, than the military gains that have been made on the battlefield. So I think you have to look at both sides. If you're going to have the end of Hamas, you have to have a separation between Hamas and the Palestinian people. And you also have to have the ability of the international community to support a peace process on both sides. And right now, I think Israel has not effectively put forward a vision of what that political end should be.

SACHS: Thank you so much. I'd like to push a little bit forward. So, this campaign, how would it look different? What would be the different kind of strategy to achieve what you're describing of separation between Hamas and the Palestinian people and charting some kind of political horizon.

CRONIN: Well, the first thing that would happen is that the Israeli government would be, engaging in tactics. It would use its military force in ways that support the Palestinians, who are clearly not directly associated with Hamas. Now, I'm not some kind of Panglossian person here. I understand that there is ambiguity with respect to the degree to which the Palestinians as a population, have been complicit with Hamas, and certainly there's a great deal of ambiguity as far as who's connected and who isn't. However, when you have so many women and children who are dying in such large numbers, and you have people evacuating to the south of Gaza, and they are dying in large numbers in places that are supposed to be safe zones, this does not achieve Israel's strategic end of ending Hamas. Instead, what they should be doing is providing an ability to have a third way for the Palestinians that they say they are not fighting to provide a division between Hamas and Palestinian civilians who right now are dominating the airwaves and are losing Israel, the broader informational fight. So this is not just a fight between the military and Hamas. This is also a fight about the future of of Israel's political campaign and the future ability of of their finding a way toward peace on both sides.

SACHS: Thank you so much. Shashank could I return to you and just touching up on this point? What is your take on that in terms of the Israeli strategy, especially the separation between Gaza and Hamas? Bringing in also, as Audrey mentioned, the difficulty of dealing with, a group entrenched in the Gaza Strip as Hamas was and is.

JOSHI: Yes. So I'm struck by the polling figures in the time that you'll also have seen that were published by the PSR, the Palestinian polling group, which is which, which does command some respect for its for its, professionalism, finding that about 44% of people in the West Bank said they supported Hamas, which was up from 12% in September, which is obviously horrifying, depressing, but also sobering in terms

of the impact of the, the war itself on attitudes in the West Bank, in Gaza. As you might expect, the support was, 42%. So considerably less when you're not at the, when you when you're actually at the sharp end of the response. But even that was up from 38% in the three months prior. So to the extent that we are talking about splitting the population from Hamas, this campaign has in that sense, utterly failed. It's utterly failed. Now, in terms of the the military problem you identified, yes. I mean, there's fundamentally three reasons why civilian casualties are so high. One of them is the geography of Gaza. There's very few safe places to go. You know, I think about this a lot in the context of US wars in the Middle East, in Mosul, and in many other places. People were able to leave in places where they were genuinely safe and could access medical care. To some degree, that was even true in Mariupol, in Ukraine, in southern Ukraine, although I'm not for one second praising Russian military practices. That is not the case in Gaza, given the nature of the territory. The second reason is, as you say, they are deeply embedded, in the in the architecture of Gaza, I always think back to, you know, Afghanistan and the U.S. Campaign. The Taliban ran Kabul for about, I think, five years before they were deposed and certainly had no comparable structure. And nor did even ISIS, because they had far less time to embed themselves in Mosul. Hamas has militarized Gaza to a far, far greater degree. But and it's very important I raise this third point. The third reason for high casualties, and that is IDF targeting practices, which I believe are more permissive, more expansive, more aggressive, clearly, than those that we saw from the U.S. And coalition allies in Iraq and Syria. In some cases, dangerously so. And I think that also has clearly contributed to what we see is, roughly speaking, more than I think, how many more than twice as many casualties in less than a third of the time. But all those three things are contributory factors to that outcome.

CRONIN: If I could just follow up, on this point as Shashank. I agree with you. And I think we're, observing a campaign that however it gains militarily, is really losing strategically because of that narrative. So if the Israeli government wants to be more successful in its fight against Hamas, it can recapture elements of the narrative. It's not that the increased support for Hamas is irreversible, especially if you think about the fact that Hamas claims that it is a promoter of the interests of the Palestinian people, and the Israeli government has done nothing in terms of raising its a priority in demonstrating and sort of publicly explaining how Hamas has done things that hurt the Palestinian people as well. For example, why do they have such an incredibly effective and large and tremendously impressive 3 or 400 mile underground tunnel system? And yet they allowed the civilians who are on the surface of the of, of Gaza to die. And the and that is, to me an element of hypocrisy, that if the Israeli government were more effective at drawing attention to what Hamas is doing against its own people, rather than drawing attention to the killings that the Israeli military are engaging in, or the fact that they are not providing sufficient or allowing insufficient humanitarian aid to the Palestinians who are stuck in the south of Gaza. That would be a better way to strategically gain the initiative with respect to this fight.

HULATA: Thank you. If I may, I think a few things on this first. I think the point Audrey just made is very important. And actually, many Israeli spokesmen, including me, the government, including myself, have tried to put this out, in the international media. I don't know, I'll. But if you follow this, it is so difficult to put any pro-Israeli narrative. There is no media. And I will say, regardless of the character of the Israeli government, this clearly isn't one that people like to support. When I go on the studios and talk about these issues, it's also very difficult. I also want to put a point again, you know, I'm not necessarily going to be able to convince you that we're talking about the amount of casualties. Clearly it is high. But there is also something to be said there, according to an Israeli account, which I think, we should, give some credibility to, of more than a third of those casualties are Hamas terrorists holding arms, while they were doing it for, preparing for action? Nobody is thinking about those ratios because nobody like to talk about these numbers, because the numbers are very high. I don't think in any of the complaints that you said before, the U.S. military or the British military, other militaries have been able, to reach a ratio where 1 to 2 or 1 to 1 and a half of the casualties were actually combatants still listed for active. Israel cannot convince with that when the [inaudible] are so high, when the numbers are so high, and where the footage is so bad, I understand that, the main problem I think will need to be the population in Gaza. Israel has left Gaza in 2005 completely due to the last peace agreement. The Palestinian population in Gaza at the times where they did not support Hamas and they were torn to do not support. And there were times we still did not fight. We're not able to do anything to suppress Hamas. However, you know, I don't blame them. Hamas is a very violent organization that also terrorize their own people. What I'm saying is that among the goals that Israel has put, during the war to try to enhance the capacity of the Palestinians for nonviolence, to stand up against Hamas. This is not. Not one of the goals. It couldn't be one of the goals. Those are things that we'll need to deal with later. I can tell you that when I was national security advisor years before we knew that we need to, try to prevail, and to, you know, push away from going into Gaza in the ground operation because we knew what it would look like. This war was forced on us. We did not plan this, would not intend to invade in this action. But going after Hamas and eradicating in a way. And Audrey I agree with you, we need a strategic policy to it. I said it myself. We can talk about this more. This government is clearly not doing the things they can do in the diplomatic aspect, but fighting this war in a very different way. I'm not sure any of the other militaries, if they

had needed to, to work in such conditions could work. People could invade Mariupol because Ukraine is so big. Israel has approached the Egyptians and asked them if they can please allow some of the evacuees to go into Sinai for a temporary period before they come back. None of that is possible, of course, because Gaza has this very, very severe circumstances that are unique, unfortunately.

SACHS: You know. Thank you. I'd like to stay with you for a moment and shift the conversation a little bit to the war that we haven't seen in full scale yet. Many reports have claimed that on October 11th already as well, was considering perhaps a major strike of some nature in Lebanon, with a rationale among many in the Israeli security establishment that this war is going to be a multi-front war, and that therefore Israel needs to defeat the stronger enemy, Hezbollah first, and only then turn to Hamas. And there was a real divide there in the Israeli thinking. Should Hamas be treated first? Obviously it was the perpetrator of the massacre of October 7th. But Hezbollah is, of course, stronger and a major threat to Israel. So far, we have not seen a full scale war. I'll say that the American administration, which has taken a lot of criticism, over, over Gaza, has actually been extremely focused on trying to prevent a wider scale, war and especially the one in Lebanon with at least some success. Could you tell us a little bit about your thinking about this, how you understand the Israeli thinking about this, and in particular, where do we go forward? Obviously, there is a war between Israel and Hezbollah right now, and the chance of escalation it could happen today, of course, remains. Where do you think this is going from the Israeli perspective at least?

HULATA: Right. So. Okay. I think it's important to put some things in context, especially on this event in the initial days. There was, an assessment and these were the intelligence that Hezbollah would join this conflict. I think that was eventually proven wrong. But at the time where they were deliberating that if indeed that was the case, there was, I think a ground base to act first in order to prevent from them to gain the benefit of another surprise attack such as we've seen in the south. I'm very happy this has happened. Because Israel does not need to engage in two full scale wars with ground maneuvers at the same time. And, I think that what we have learned, to understand is that, this is not in Hezbollah's interest to go into a war now for a variety of reasons. I don't think it's because of deterrence from us or from the Americans. I think that you realize that the damage to Israel that was done is significant. Once you lost the surprise element, the damage to Lebanon were quite, dramatically be larger than the damage in Israel. And the Hezbollah has all of the reasons due to, its capabilities for a future stage, because, Iran who's clearly coordinating, strategically this, even not, tactically on Hamas, even though I think they were involved more than than we think. But, to keep their strength. However, yes, we do have, conflict in the North. If it wasn't in the shadow of the war in Gaza, this would have been considered a war, because it is. This is what it is, without ground maneuver, without us, going into Lebanon, without Hezbollah firing barrage of rockets on our civilian populations, which at least until now, they have refrained from from doing over the brink of starting a war. If there was a miscalculation, if too many casualties on either side, or if Nasrallah decides to open the war, it will happen. What I think is important to say from an Israeli perspective is that October 7th proved something that we in Israel feared. But it was difficult to explain both to ourselves and I think also for the international community, I think the risk of, surprise ground invasion into communities and just civilians, going in and butchering so many civilians the way Hamas did. If Nasrallah would have ordered his people to do that when Israel is unready, as unfortunately we were in Gaza, the damage would have been, I don't know, ten times as much. Just because the magnitude of population that we have in the north is so wide. Israel is now on the defensive. So I'm sure that at least for the foreseeable future, we'll make sure that they can not surprise us. And even if they do, they encountered soldiers in much larger quantities than, Hamas did in Gaza, unfortunately on October 7th. But this does not eliminate the risk. And I think what's important in this session, and I told us in many of the, panels and opportunities that I have. What was supposed to prevent that from happening in Lebanon is a UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that was crafted at the end of the Second World War attempting to keep Hezbollah miles away from our borders. This was never, honored by Hezbollah, never enforced by the international community. And UNIFIL is completely incapable of doing this. Peacekeeping is not a mission in a region such as the Middle East. We need more war prevention and not peacekeeping. And this is clearly not in the charter of UNIFIL and clearly not in the intention of the countries. And I think what Israel is doing now, and hopefully effective, is to make sure that all of the countries, and especially the U.S. And the Europeans, understand that now is the time to put meaning into 1701. What more do we need to see after October 7th to understand what might happen if they are granted the possibility to do that in another murder? Can Israel just sit there and wait until this happens? Will Israel needs another October 7th as justification to act on Lebanon and to push Hezbollah away from our border. My answer is no. I mean, unless there is a meaningful diplomatic effort, Israel is a part of it, but Israel I don't think needs to, to be the head of it because we will not incorporate UNIFIL, and going back to what Audrey you said before, there was an opportunity to do something diplomatically before Israel needs to act militarily, and hopefully this could be done because if it won't be able to be done, I think, unfortunately, it was just a matter of time until Israel will need to act, because we cannot just sit there for years until Hezbollah finds an opportunity where he can invade our borders and massacre our communities the way

Hamas did in the south. This will be even more devastating than what happened in the south, and Israel cannot allow that.

SACHS: Thank you so much. I'd really like to turn to your moment on Hezbollah. How should we understand Hezbollah? It is quite different than Hamas. It is a non-state actor, but perhaps as a state actor, it's a hybrid actor in many respects. It's a proxy of Iran, but also an organic Lebanese party with mass support among the Shia population there. It's the strongest power in Lebanon, obviously, but it's not the Lebanese state in and of itself. How does it fit into the rubric of understanding a terrorist organization or an insurgency organization? What is it? In other words.

CRONIN: Yes. Well, Hezbollah was one of those organizations that reflects a number of different paradigms. I would call it mainly an insurgency organization that takes that uses terrorism and engages in terrorist acts. So it is quite different from Hamas. In that sense, it's much larger. And I would like to say, Eyal, that I think actually that what the Israeli government is doing in general, with respect to Hezbollah shows a remarkable amount of constraint, constraint, restraint, and also that it is politically savvy. It is politically nuanced. I'm in support of what the Israeli government is doing with respect to Hezbollah and preventing this from becoming a regional conflict. But to go back to the question of the Palestinians, no Israeli spokesman is going to be able to make this case. What has to happen is that there needs to be a pro-Palestinian group of actions. This is not just a matter of public statements on the part of a government spokesman. It's a matter of things like preventing a widespread famine and the killing of many more Palestinians in the south of Gaza, and realizing that allowing in food aid and fuel aid so that they can stay alive is far more important to Israel's overall strategy of achieving its end, than, is whatever marginal benefit Hamas might gain from that small amount of food or fuel. This would be one way that Israel could recapture the narrative that isn't standing in front of some mic. It's actually taking action that shows support for a future peace with the Palestinian people.

SACHS: Thanks so much. Shashank going to turn to you first just on response to the same kind of questions. But then I'd like to broaden the aperture. So why don't we start on this issue of the north.

JOSHI: So I take a slightly different view. You know, so Audrey described it as restrained. Whilst I acknowledge the root cause of this problem is Hezbollah's failure to abide by Resolution 1701, which, of course, obliges it to withdraw north of the Litani river and not be present in southern Lebanon. And I agree. UNIFIL as a force is incapable of monitoring and implementing that. It isn't tasked with disarming, of course. It's just tasked with verifying whether disarmament occurred. I wouldn't describe Israel's behavior as particularly restrained. I think Israel has seen that Iran and Hezbollah want to avoid a full scale conflict. And Israel has, in some ways, you might call sadly taken advantage of that to try to press them and hit them very hard indeed. Even pushing the envelope, in some ways, what we are seeing between the two sides is clearly not within the established rules of engagement. That is tit for tat. Reciprocal low level strikes within disputed territory like Shebaa Farms up in the north of Israel. We're seeing something that goes well beyond that. The strike in Beirut that killed a senior Hamas leader, Saleh al-Aroui, was very striking. Yes. Israel indicated clearly this was a strike on Hamas. This was not aimed at Lebanese Hezbollah. But nevertheless, diplomats, officials across Europe, in the U.S. Were extremely worried. U.S. officials have been concerned at strikes on the Lebanese Armed Forces and the impact that has had on Lebanon. And of course, the level of displacement is very high on both sides. It's about 80, 90,000 in northern Israel. Clearly an unacceptable situation for Israel to live in where citizens cannot return to their homes. Of course, the displacement in southern Lebanon is also extremely high 70,000 plus very great damage to homes. And I think right now, when I listen to officials, in, among Western officials observing this situation, they are very concerned that Israel is maybe is perhaps pushing the envelope in terms of the strikes, that while they have assured the U.S. They do not intend to open a second front, that they may be taking steps that increase the risk of a second front opening up, whether by accident or indeed by design. And I think there is also significant concern, that this may, this may, as the, as the war intensity of the war in Gaza diminishes over time and as reservists are freed up, after a short period that in the spring, the risk of the northern front erupting could open up again, and that could have grave consequences for the political stability of Lebanon.

SACHS: I'd like to push in on this a little bit though. This case has been made also by Israelis about about Gaza. Is there any chance that Hezbollah would withdraw north of the Litani if there were not a credible threat that if it doesn't do so diplomatically, it might have to do so militarily? In other words, Eyal put it out before and you mentioned as well, hundreds of thousands of Israelis evacuated from the northern border and the Gaza Strip border, of course. And for them to return home, they have to be not meters away from the elite Hezbollah forces, but at least quite a few kilometers and miles. Can that happen without a credible Israeli threat to use force if the diplomacy that the Americans and the French and others are conducting is not successful?

JOSHI: I agree with the thrust of your question. You know, Hezbollah is not going to respond to blandishments and diplomatic niceties, although as important is that is they do have a political, economic, diplomatic stake in Lebanon. They understand, that their positions on the blue line are at risk. They're very militarily exposed. And therefore they they you know, we even saw some tactical tactical withdrawals last month, albeit not not quite as substantial as as Israel would want or expect. So I agree there has to be some degree of military pressure on Hezbollah. They've taken substantial losses, very substantial losses in southern Lebanon and also in, in Syria, through Israeli strikes. But I think there are still nonetheless some actions, particularly strikes in Beirut, that that have the potential to be much more destabilizing. And Israel has to be has to be much more careful about those.

SACHS: Also, I think I'd like to stay with you for a moment and, broaden the aperture. We'll bring everyone in this to this topic. But of course, Hezbollah, to a lesser degree, Hamas, but also the Houthis that we haven't discussed yet. They're all partners of a single country, Iran, and to a large degree or to a certain degree, I should say this is a bit of a proxy war. Israel, Iranian proxy. Not to say that Hamas takes order from Tehran. It does not necessarily receive some, some support, material support and diplomatic support. And Hezbollah, of course, and the Houthis are very closely tied to Iran. What is the risk of escalation there? What on your mind? What might Israel have to think about doing? There are those in Israel who argue, you have to stop fighting the messengers. You have to make sure that those who are sending them understand that they are on the line. And of course, we've seen also attacks in Iran, not only, and in fact attacks not by Israel. We've seen a major and very deadly ISIS attack, but we also saw attacks in the east and now heating up along the Pakistani border. Can you give us a sense of your take on that?

JOSHI: I mean, first of all, I'm more concerned about U.S.-Iran escalation at this moment than I am about Israel-Iran escalation. Clearly, had the Iranian missile strike on al-Asad airbase a few days ago incurred more casualties or caused more casualties. I think that could well have have prompted a serious discussion about more expansive strikes on Iran. You know, as far as we know, 15 Patriot interceptors were fired, indicating a very, very significant ballistic missile assault on the base. A lot of Americans could have died. You know, we've already seen Navy Seals die inadvertently in the process of attempting to interdict Iranian shipments to the Houthis. And the Red Sea dynamics are still very serious indeed. So I'm more concerned about that at this point in time. Overall, there is still the assessment I have, and as far as I can see, analysts have watching this is that Iran still seeks to avoid a full scale war with either U.S. Or with Israel. All the risk factors that we saw prior to October 7th, Iran's looming succession crisis, its economic crisis, its political instability, its regime vulnerability, all of these factors were absolutely, you know, there before October 7th. And they all constrain Iran's actions today. But I, I am worried by what I see as an element of impulsiveness in some aspects of Iran's behavior today. And I was really struck by the missile strikes against Pakistan. I followed the Iran Pakistan border for many years. You know, ten, 15 years ago, we had, cross-border shelling. We had some limited raids, targeting what was then called ul-Adl, the Sunni, the Sunni Baloch militant group over the border in Pakistan. But the use of ballistic missiles. And in the space of about a few days, Iranian strikes on Pakistan, on Iraq, on Syria, as well as all of the other, what we might call proxy activity in the region, that, to me, indicates an Iran that is perhaps out of a sense of vulnerability, lashing out, taking considerable risks. And last, the last point Natan in the long run. So so, you know, a year from now, I worry about the mentality of the Iranian regime and the questions they will be asking themselves. Observing the change in Israel psychology post October 7th, asking what is our threshold for nuclear weapons? What is our ability to protect the regime? And I think the nuclear calculus could begin to change over time, now, in a way that has not been the case for many, many years.

SACHS: Thanks so much. So on this Iran issue, Eyal, Audrey if you'd like to come in, I'm sure you have some thoughts. Why don't we turn to Iran and then we'll we'll turn to the day after in which we're getting a lot of questions online. Yeah, please.

HULATA: Sure. Audrey, do you want to go first or or should I?

CRONIN: After you. And then I'll speak.

HULATA: Okay. So on Iran, I think a few things are, important to say. First of all, it is clear that, Iran is the maybe the most important, or largest beneficiary for, for all of this, things that are there happening. 2024, unfortunately, has been too good a year, for Iran. Way more than they they deserve. And the war in Gaza is only one of, I think, to Shashank's point that, I think it is bolstering their self-esteem to a point where they might do a strategic mistake. And, what they're doing now in Pakistan is both dangerous for them, you know, this is, the [inaudible] part of Iran has nothing to do with Israel. Good luck for, in that, fortune. For change. There's something that Iran is doing that has clearly nothing to do with this. I think what's happening in the Red Sea should be more worrisome for everybody. This is affecting global trade. Of course, the Houthis use the war in Gaza as an excuse, but they're not only attacking ships that are going to Israel or

related to Israel. They are disturbing the entire global trade from Asia to Europe through the Suez Canal. And the Egyptians are suffering from that. This is all Iranian doing. And all of the weapons that are there are coming from Iran. And what I want to point out to you and Shashank you may disagree, but I think it's important to put out, I think that, we put so much emphasis on what are the tactical considerations or adversaries or enemies a certain point in time. Yes, of course, Iran is not interested with a war with the U.S. Right now. Why? Because if it starts now, they will lose. But it doesn't mean that Iran won't be interested in such a conflict in the future once they are nuclear. And we have to ask ourselves as, as democracies, as liberal countries who are not looking for war. And I'm speaking as Israel's former national security advisor, we are not looking for wars. We're trying to prevent them. But when we do not engage, when the problems are small and wait until the problems are too big for us to cope with, we find ourselves in a situation in the context of Gaza, such as October 7th, when they have the upper hand and the ability, to surprise us. If and again, I'm not saying this in the U.S., I'm not in a position to, to, promote or to, to suggest U.S. policy, but I'm talking just generally including in Israel, if we will continue to wait just because the other side doesn't want a war right now to avoid a war, we will get a longer or stronger or more devastating war in the future, because this is the reason we need to consider. This is the situation between Israel and Hezbollah at the moment. We can refrain from war and I do not push for a war. I opposed opening another front at the beginning of this war, and I thought that it wasn't right for Israel to have a preemptive strike because of the damage that will be to Lebanon. I negotiated the, maritime agreement. I want to remind everybody, because I thought this could bring a new future for Lebanon and give them tools to push back on Hezbollah. Unfortunately, this shouldn't probably won't be the case. But if we don't act when we can, we don't act when we need to, and we just wait just because we think that the fact that the other side is not opening a war because he's afraid of us or deterred of us, that's not the case. And I think we need to to reevaluate it. I think there's a lesson for that for all of us from October 7.

SACHS: Audrey, please.

CRONIN: I, I think that the emphasis upon Iran's role can be overdone, as important as that is, I think it's dangerous for us to be talking about Iran as if it's pulling a lot of strings over which it has complete control when it comes to non-state actors. These are different situations. Again, I'm not I'm not denying the role of Iran and the fact that Iran also provides means for, the groups that we're talking about. However, the degree to which they control the actions of their proxy actors is less than it once was, particularly when you talk about actors individually. So, for example, the attacks by Iran and Pakistan, both of them had in their interests to reduce the threat of non-state actors, in Balochistan. So it is not by accident that that there was talk of brotherly love in the aftermath on the part of the Pakistani government. So I don't see that as quite the same destabilizing scenario as we might see with respect to Hezbollah. And also, as we do already see with respect to the Houthis in the Red Sea. I agree with you, Shashank, that the fact that two SEALs died in and a maritime interdiction operation is very serious. But I also believe that the the Houthis build some of their own weapons. They have the capability because the the role of technology today is more nuanced. Non-state actors, proxy actors are much more capable of building things that can act asymmetrically, that can take a asymmetrical advantage of former state military forces. So when it comes to the Houthis, they have become extremely adept, in part as a result of their fight against the Saudis, but also with the United States. Now, they have become extremely adept at using accessible technologies in in ways that makes it very difficult for any state to respond to them. Iran knows that, but they also don't have full control over the Houthis, the Houthis, just as they did not, in my opinion, have control over Hamas.

SACHS: Thank you. So that's one point. And of course, on October 7th, Hamas used, some very cheap technology. And it's really simple, but cheap technology, to, undermine Israel's technological defenses, immediately on the border with horrific consequences. So with the last 15 minutes, almost, I'd like to turn to the day after. That's a lot of the questions that we're getting, of course. And I'll open the floor to whoever wants to jump first. But we were seeing already major divides between the United States and Israel on what the day after might look like. Most notably, in the last week, Prime Minister Netanyahu was equivocated again about the possibility of a two state solution, mostly coming down negatively on that. With the American administration, putting together notionally a package of clearly a target of a two state solution. But also reviving what was a very active negotiation between the Americans, the Israelis and the Saudis until October 6th over the potential normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. That would have included very large and controversial in the United States elements between America and Saudi Arabia, in particular, a defense pact of some sort, perhaps some full treaty between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and secondly, a nuclear program, civilian, nuclear program, that the Americans would help the Saudis, establish. This now, in the thinking in Washington, among many, would include a major role for Gulf states in the Gaza Strip. In the past, others, including us at Brookings, worked a lot on thinking what might be a Palestinian component. Now, it seems quite clear the Palestinian component would be helping in the Gaza Strip in some shape or form. So a little bit of form to thoughts on this and where that what that might look like. And I'll just I'll add two more wrinkles to this. There are elections in the United States, as you may know. Coming up in

November and there may be elections in Israel happening in 2024, as many people, predict. How would that also affect our calculation? Shashank, would you like to go first?

JOSHI: Yes. I mean, first of all, it seems to me that, it's very difficult to reconcile the aims and red lines of all sides. We have seen the Biden administration, through Antony Blinken, specify that there has to be no reduction in the territory of Gaza and, there should be no, permanent occupation, as well. On the Israeli side, we're clearly seeing the aspiration for a buffer zone, which is incompatible with the demand for no reduction in the territory of Gaza. Is incompatible with the idea of no occupation. And it seems to me that, this this, this there's a real long term problem here, which is that given the figures I outlined at the beginning, given where we are in this campaign, this will take many, many more months, in order to have any hope of breaking Hamas's back and given the degree to which is, as we said, it is rooted in the politics, society and economics of Gaza over a 17 year period formerly and of course, prior to that, informally. This it seems to be impossible to suppress without a permanent, substantial militarized presence of some kind. Hamas is not going to be able to be prevented from restoring some control over Gaza without that. There are only a couple of ways to do that. One of them is a permanent Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip, which Israel's government does not seek and no other country wants, and would have its own disastrous consequences. And the other is some other kind of alternative force. It is impossible for me to see how you fund, raise, prepare, support that external force, whether that's led by the Palestinian Authority or by any other permutation of states from the outside Arab states or others, without a paradigm change in Israel's attitude towards the two state solution, the two state process, and the idea of a long term Palestinian state. I don't see how we reconcile these problems without without a change in that respect.

SACHS: Audrey, could I turn to you.

CRONIN: Well, it's worth remembering that no Israeli war has ever ended without the involvement of external actors of some kind. So we do bear a responsibility to help in this situation. And I, you know, as much as I'm feeling very much like what Shashank says, it's, you know, it sounds extremely hopeless. Nonetheless, we have we don't have the right to be hopeless. We have to find a solution to this. Even in the fact that there's a lack of leadership among the Palestinians. The Israelis are very far, too far to the right and likely to remain so with respect to a future peace solution. And also, the United States has lost its influence in the Middle East and no longer can bring parties together in the way that it once did, especially through the 1990s and earlier in the 20th century. So yes, there are there are basic fundamental structural problems. Shashank has laid them out very well, but we really don't have any choice. I don't really like the the word the day after, the phrase, in the question, because there's not going to be some sort of day on which the sun shines and the whole thing is solved. I think this is going to be a matter of incremental steps and incremental movements towards solutions. And and, you know, the first is to try to find I hate to keep harping on this, but try to find a future, a way towards some kind of future for Palestinian civilians who are not involved with Hamas and then also working with moderate Arab states. That's, what choice do we have? They are in the region. They need to play an important role. I think that working with Arab states and using the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia is crucial. I think that we're going to have a series of cease fires and, and the stepping down of the kind of conflict and then ultimately, yes, an external actor, hopefully, is willing to play a role. And it could be moderate Arab states. It could be the U.N. or the United States, probably not the U.N. but in any case, it's not as if you've got some blueprint that's going to be perfect. The two state solution, especially in the short term, is is not viable in the longer term. I believe that it's the only solution.

SACHS: Thank you. Eyal, turning to you.

HULATA: Yeah. Well, I find myself in a situation where, it's very difficult for me to, to explain the policy of a government in general. But clearly I don't support most of what they're doing, especially on this. On this aspect, I think there is lack of, of and capacity of will of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his ability to, to promote even things he knows, and he wants to promote and disregard. So with your permission, I think it. Such as to to commit to the things that are necessary for normalization with Saudi Arabia. Netanyahu knows what is expected of him because clearly President Biden told him that, and, you know, Netanyahu said before that he will support, a Palestinian state. One would argue that he even said that, last week, in this point in time. But politically, it's completely impossible for him to maintain his government with that, unfortunately, he's just, I think, too weak to promote a process that can be, meaningful and viable. That's a problem in Israel. At the moment, each of the parties here have their own problems. I do want to say a few things that I think are important. First, about the Israeli public. And this is a bit, generalized because again, if you if you take the parties that consisted the government that I served as national Security advisor and take the parties that consist this coalition that's about the entire Israeli, political spectrum. That's about it. And most of the civilians in Israel, when they look back at how things evolved in previous attempts to reach a solution, how the Oslo Accords ended up with the busses exploding in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv by Hamas, by the how the disengagement in 2005, which was supposed to give the Palestinians an opportunity to do

something meaningful, was run over by a Hamas rocket, started the firing, ended up in October 7th or proposition 2001 and 2008, 2014 by Netanyahu, by the way, to reach solutions and agreements have been, pushed away by the Palestinians. I'm not saying this because Israel did everything right. Israel did not do everything right. And there are issues, especially with the right wing in Israel and their, will to annex the West Bank and to prevent any, future solution. I'm not shying away from that. And I think it's important to say most Israelis don't believe that. Most Israelis do not want to annex the West Bank. Most Israelis would want a stable solution where we can live with security, and the Palestinians can live in security. And security will continue to be there. And I'm also saying that it's important for the Palestinians to have security, because in the Middle East, that's the major problem. People kill each other over no reason or, you know, some ideologists think that there is a reason because everything in the end goes back to who is the right God and [inaudible] we need to worship? We have nowhere else to go. This is the homeland of the Jewish people, and we want to live in prosperity and in security with our neighbors. This is why we're normalizing. We're trying to normalize with everybody else. And I'm saying this not because it has a quick fix to what we're saying right now. I want to relate to what Audrey said at the end. I think we all don't have the, the ability to lose hope and to be forceful. We all need to believe that this is solvable. As Audrey said, I also don't believe that the two state solution is a viable option in the near future. But ultimately, I also believe that the Palestinians need a solution of self-determination to live their own lives. They just need to do this with a pragmatic government that isn't radical, who isn't educating the population to kill us. Is that doable? I have to believe it is, because if it's not, we'll continue to fight year after year and round after round. And the criticism about the Israeli government, I will not push, against it because I'm also critical of what they're doing, they're incapable of promoting the process. But eventually I do have a strong belief that this is possible and we need to work towards that end.

SACHS: Thank you very much. I'm going to do a quick, quick lightning round. I'm just going to ask you what is the main thing that you're looking at right now or in the next few days or months. In terms of a variable, what might determine things? I'll start myself and I'll say that the the northern front of my mind, I thought this, from October 7th, I have to say, is the crucial question and for the United States policy as well, not that what's happening in Gaza isn't momentous and horrendous. But the potential for damage if the war in the North flares up at any moment is comparable, at least to what we're seeing in the Gaza Strip. And so that, to my mind, is absolutely crucial. And I have to say, I commend the American administration for focusing an enormous amount of effort, including a lot of, personnel time on planes and in Beirut, in trying to lessen the chance of that. But but success is really not guaranteed. I'll go the order with the order we started with. So, Shashank, why don't I turn to you, also you're the journalist, most most, used to these kinds of unfair questions. What is the one variable you're looking for?

JOSHI: If I can just offer two Natan. I mean, obviously, I agree with the northern front, but I'd say the two to emphasize are, what I should have said at the outset, of course, is that the Israeli military is now surrounding Khan Yunis in the south. And, this is an important phase of the campaign, is Hamas's leadership is thought to be based in or around Khan Younis. We could see, you know, death of senior leaders. We could see what appears to be shifts in the nature of the campaign in the coming weeks, so that that bears watching very closely. Although I don't think that changes our strategic calculation. The final point, I'll say, is the single factor that will make a difference to most of what we've discussed. Again, whilst not drastically changing Israel's military strategy is a change in Israel's government that will change the diplomatic tone. Around this war, it will change many of the possibilities. I think it will ease some of the tensions we're seeing between, the U.S. and Israel, Israel and its partners. So the change in Israel's domestic politics, which we all understand is likely at some point, sooner rather than later, I think that's that's going to be the biggest shift in this campaign.

SACHS: Thanks so much. Audrey, please over to you. Anything you're looking for?

CRONIN: One of the advantages of not going first is that I can say yes, and. So I agree with what I've heard so far. And I just want to add in two additional factors, which are, first of all, humanitarian aid that prevents, mass starvation among the Palestinians. Secondly, a political agreement, probably a ceasefire that enables the return of the hostages.

SACHS: Thank you so much. And last but not least, Eyal.

HULATA: I'm clearly in the position to say yes, and. Because I agree with everything. I want to talk about, another angle. Natan, if you remember, it's the event at Brookings we did in September. Before all of this has happened, we're discussing Saudi Arabia normalization, and I took the time to provide it to me to talk only about spoilers, spoilers about positive, engagements that I spoke about Iran and I spoke about Hamas. I did not predict October 7th. I do not try to take credit for that, but I want to talk about spoilers now. I think all of the things that were said are for the immediate things we need to take care of. What worries me,

in the long run, is the ability of Iran to continue to govern that I'm not getting into discussion if they are fully in control, not fully in control. Of course they are not fully in control, but this is their strategy. They want to destabilize the region. Normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia is not in their interest. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians is not in their interest and they're pursuing their nuclear capabilities. I'm looking for that. I'm looking to see if any of that, allows the other factions, including the Americans, including the, NATO members, to understand that we need a better strategy to confront this threat that would unfortunately, if we let it it will continue to cause problems throughout, the region. Hopefully we can have a joint strategy against that which we all agree upon.

SACHS: Well, it remains to me to do two things. First is to, re-emphasize, we have an event coming up on February 5th. I hope everyone will tune in. That's on the Palestinian politics and society of the future there. And later in February, we'll have a posting soon, looking at just this question of Iran and its proxies in the region and to what degree it's involved or not involved in its own calculations, that not all, of course, have to do with Israel. And finally, just to, thank you to say a very big thank you to a truly expert panel. Real pleasure to Audrey Kurth Cronin. Thank you very much for joining us. To Shashank Joshi and Eyal Hulata here in Washington, D.C. Thank you for joining under difficult circumstances. Thank you everyone for listening in. We hope next time is a, less somber mood. But I expect it might not be. So please stay tuned for more, from Brookings. Thank you very much.