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THE CURRENT: WAR IN ISRAEL AND GAZA

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. The large-scale surprise assault launched by Hamas this weekend was the worst attack on Israeli soil since the 1973 October war. On Monday, Brookings experts Natan Sachs, Shibley Telhami, Suzanne Maloney, and Molly Reynolds addressed Israel's response to the attacks, Iran's involvement, the regional repercussions, and how domestic politics will bear on the U.S. response. Brookings Senior Fellow Michael O'Hanlon moderated this discussion. Now, over to Mike.

O'HANLON: Greetings, everyone. My name is Mike O'Hanlon. I'm the Phil Knight chair in defense and strategy at Brookings, and I'm here with distinguished colleagues, some of the country's best Middle East experts, to discuss the ongoing crisis, conflict, and tragedy in Gaza and Israel.

We will proceed as follows: we will look forward at some point to your questions, actually, some of which have already come in. But we will begin with some opening thoughts from each of us just for a few minutes. And there'll be at least three Brookings scholars, starting with Natan Sachs, who runs our Middle East center and followed by Shibley Telhami, who is a longstanding expert on the region, professor at the University of Maryland, and an expert also on public opinion project that he's undertaken with great effect over the last decade or more in the United States and also in the broader Middle East in regard to important events like what we're seeing unfold now. And then Suzanne Maloney, who is our vice president for Foreign Policy studies at Brookings, one of the country's best Iran experts, and certainly can speak to the role that Iran may or may not have played. Well, we know they played some role, but the question is exactly what. So that will be how we proceed. I will just say 60 more seconds of my own thoughts to frame, and then we may have a couple of more Brookings scholars after Suzanne, and then we'll go to your questions for the remaining 20 minutes or so, taking us up till about 12:45, I think.

I would just observe one broad analogy, which is, in reflecting on the wars of the Middle East of the last half century or so, for the book that I wrote and published earlier this year called "Military History for the Modern Strategist," the the example that jumps to my mind and it may not be the only one or the best, but it is the one that jumps to my mind. Is Israel's decision in 2006 to go into southern Lebanon, when a series of attacks of various types from Hezbollah into Israel had precipitated a crisis not entirely unlike what we've just seen, although on a smaller scale, on balance, to be sure. And what Israel found in the following 30 days or so of its occupation and operations within southern Lebanon is that it could find a lot of Hezbollah weapons caches,

command centers and even leadership, but it also took a lot of casualties in the process, had a great deal of difficulty eliminating the threat in any meaningful way, and to the point where most believe that Hezbollah has actually quickly expanded its post-2006 weapons capabilities, even beyond what it had prior to that Israeli operation. But Israel does like to think that it, quote unquote, reestablished deterrence. In other words, everyone suffered so much as a result of that series of events that no one would be likely to want to undertake that same kind of path lightly in the future. And so I'm wondering in my own head, is that essentially going to become Israel's goal in Gaza? To cause certainly some direct military effects and weakening of Hamas, but at the same time also to have everyone pay enough of a price that this sort of operation is not seen as one to be undertaken lightly in the future. Of course, Israel is going to be left holding the bag politically with this kind of scenario, because if it tries to take away Hamas's ability to run Gaza, the question then obviously becomes who will replace Hamas?

And so for more on all of this, let me begin by handing the baton to Natan. Over to you, my friend.

SACHS: Thank you, Mike. Thank you very much. I guess the headline I would say for this is that it's important to understand from abroad this is not another round between Israel and Hamas. This is not another occasion of violence in the Gaza Strip. This is completely of a completely different magnitude. The way Israelis are talking about this is as an Israeli 9/11, as equal or worse than 1973, which is a national trauma, the Yom Kippur War in Israel, as it's called, where Egypt and Syria surprised Israel on a terrible attack in that war. The Israeli casualties were upward of 2000. Now, after one day it was already upward of 700, the vast majority of whom are civilians, including families and people killed of all ages, families in their homes, and, of course, the mass kidnaping of civilians and the taking of prisoners of war, of military prisoners of war. On the civilian side, we're seeing reports, we know that there are children there. The latest I see is that perhaps babies. This is, so my point here is, you know, there's enough incendiary stuff on Twitter, I don't think you need our Space for that, my point is not that, my point is that from the Israeli psyche, this is a completely different ballgame. The way Israelis are talking about this is as the worst day in Israel's history in the 75 years of Israel's history. That may be an exaggeration. Maybe we're just in the first week of this. Perhaps Israel will look at it differently in retrospect, but it is certainly up there. This is a day that will be remembered by everyone, everyone involved. Israel is, you know, is not a very big place. Everyone either knows someone and or someone who knows someone or is a relative of someone who was killed or kidnaped or still is missing. And they're not sure if they're killed or kidnaped or what happened to them exactly. What this means, policy-wise, is that the political mood in Israel right now will both be willing to incur costs that Israel was not willing to incur in the past, including in ground invasions that were always seen as extremely dangerous because they are and they still are. But with upward of 700 dead, there is a willingness, a demand, even, in Israel to incur costs that it would not have been in the past, and I say this with deep grief, also, and as to exact costs from Gaza, that it was not willing to in the past. We're already seeing the cutting off electricity and other things that are terrible ideas. This is going to be a terrible time in the Gaza Strip as well. Terrible.

What will Israel try to do? I'm almost certain it will enter militarily in the ground forces. It's a given, I think. The question is what will be the goal? And here there's a fundamental question about the Israeli strategy towards Hamas. Since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip over 15 years ago, Israel has tried to contain Hamas. And in the beginning it was to try and see if the Gazans would topple it. And then Israel not only got over that, but moved on and contained Hamas and lived quite okay with having an address it had to fight every once in a while, bloody fights with a lot of rockets, but separate from the Palestinian Authority. The calls in Israel to topple Hamas now are loud. I do not know if they will win the day, but I would not rule it out. I think we're making a mistake to think that the calculation of the past is true today. It is possible that Israel will try to go all the way in or find itself going all the way. And what would be the day after? I don't know. And more importantly, the Israeli leadership doesn't know. It would be an extremely difficult, possibly terrible scenario afterwards. But there is sort of, as I started, this kind of 9/11 sense to this. I think in the Israeli psyche, there is a sense that as hard as that might be, what happened on Saturday simply must never be allowed to happen again. The fundamental sort of bargain in Israel and part of the, part of the idea of Israel is the ability of Israel to defend itself, to defend its own people. And seeing

hours after the 6:30 a.m. attack on Saturday, hours, with dozens of Hamas gunmen rampaging through Israeli towns, massacring civilians and then taking the hostages back with almost no one stopping them, with the Air Force not there and with way too few soldiers. This is causing a deep crisis of trust in the state and even in the military in Israel, one that is already a trauma. And and I'm saying this with grief. I think as we saw in 9/11 in the United States, on 9/10, if I suggested to anyone that the United States might invade Afghanistan, they would call me crazy. On 9/12, it seemed an inevitability. That is sort of the mood right now. I don't want to belabor the comparison to 9/11. There are huge differences, but in terms of the psyche and what that means for policy, I think it is relevant.

I'll add one last point and turn it over. I'm sorry for going so long. One of the most important policy questions, and we've already seen the Biden administration address this and even bring the Gerald Ford carrier group to signal this, is to make sure Hezbollah stays out of this. Hezbollah is more powerful than Hamas by far. And Israel's response in Lebanon, I fear, would be absolutely devastating in a country that's already reeling from enormous domestic crises. If Hezbollah decides to join, I don't think Iran will, but as Iran does, it may get Hezbollah to do it at the expense of Lebanese rather than Iranians. I think we will see huge devastation in the north, precisely because Israel feels so cornered, and that would be extremely dangerous. And that's the number one thing, I think, to stop the absolute tragedy that's going to unfold now in Gaza and is already unfolding right now. That is already happening. And the question is how that unfolds. Lebanon is still an open question. I'll stop there. And I'm sorry for my somber tone.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Natan. And our thoughts and prayers to you and yours and family in Israel and elsewhere in the region. And Shibley, over to you. I know you also have a lot of ties to the region, so our hearts are with you as well, my friend.

TELHAMI: Thank you. Well, you know, Natan said, you know, if you look at two days of fighting, we have several hundred Israelis killed and nearly 3000 wounded in the assault. And then if you look at the Palestinian side following the Israeli bombings in Gaza, we have also hundreds of Palestinian dead and thousands wounded. And that's going to accumulate. It's accumulating already by the hour. And as noted, you know, based, even if we don't know the exact ratio, we do know in from prior situations that most of the victims are civilians. Most of the victims are civilians. And I think that we need to be very mindful of that. We need to be to go beyond just the immediate strategic urgency, which obviously needs to be confronted and addressed to also assure that civilians are not targeted or, you know, recklessly endangered in any operations. And I think that when I look at President Biden's assurance to Israelis on the first day, it was very important. This was a day of utter vulnerability when people are watching, loved ones being vulnerable and the military, unable -- that they expected defend them, failed them. And it was a moment from the president to provide assurances to Israelis that we're with you. And I think it probably resonated. And I could see watching Israeli TV it resonate with a lot of Israeli people.

I do hope that the president of the United States has gone far beyond that privately and in the future going publicly that not all bombings are going to be okay. The ends don't justify the means. We need to assure that whether it's Palestinian victims or Israeli victims, that civilians are not recklessly endangered. And it's been a disaster in Gaza, and obviously now a disaster in Israel, and as Natan said, if in fact a front is opened with Hezbollah, you're going to have far more tragedy and destruction both in Israel and Lebanon. And I think that would be an awful escalation for everybody involved. But at the moment, that has to also be a priority for the United States. Look, I understand that hearts harden in times of war. The Palestinians' hearts have been hardened by 56 years of occupation with no end in sight and seeing the Israeli right wing rise and claim that the land is only theirs, not for Palestinians. I can see how Israeli hearts are being hardened now, witnessing what happened to their loved ones, and that's not unnatural. That is what we see in all wars. So therefore, it is the responsibility of our leaders, particularly of the United States, which has an incredibly important role here, to go above this hardening of hearts and make sure that we're consistent in the way we recommend policy and assure civilians' safety to the extent possible. So this is the first message I want to send, because I think that is going to be extraordinarily important.

I also think that one cannot be confident that the policies that are being made right now, whether it's by Hamas or by Israel, anybody else, is sound policy. It's on the fly. This came as a shocker. The urge to respond is not going to be necessarily - lead to wise decisions. And I think the United States has a critical role in counseling. Natan said accurately that the urge in Israel right now is to go and destroy Hamas, destroy Hamas, and even maybe control all of Gaza. If you think about it, you know, how is that going to solve the problem? Israel left Gaza in the first place, physically, the military left Gaza because it was too costly to hold. What will happen to millions, 2.2 millions of devastated people after Hamas is destroyed? Obviously, there are lots of questions and will therefore a massive operation in Gaza not draw Hezbollah in? Even if the U.S. is working hard not to do it. Is this what we're likely to witness in terms of death and destruction, is that not going to put pressure on Hezbollah to join even if they don't want to join and no matter what the counseling is from the U.S.? So we need to make sure that the counseling that's coming from the U.S. is not just to put pressure on on Hezbollah or Iran or Qatar or whoever might be, might have influence with Hamas, but also counseling Israel rather than essentially saying we'll support everything we do, because right now even the Israeli people don't have confidence in their government, the government is, knows what it's doing or that they can trust it. There's even you know, you can you could see from the Israeli discourse that one is watching closely that there is that degree of a, you know, mistrust.

One final point on this that I think that really needs to be said. Put Hamas aside for a moment. You know, a lot of people thought the Palestinian issue was no longer an issue in the Middle East. Many of us, I think, in the tone and I have been to the people who've been saying that for a while, that this issue has a way of coming back on the agenda and and reshuffling the deck for the region. It has done that. It is - you cannot avoid it. It is something that has to be addressed. And this is obviously not the time to think immediately about that. But the U.S. has to start thinking about what, after this crisis, can be done to resolve that issue in a way that does not come back again to haunt everyone.

O'HANLON: That you, Shibley, and now we'll go to Suzanne with a particular interest, of course, in the Iran dimension. And I'm intrigued, Suzanne, about where you come down on the likelihood that Iran was actually involved in the coordination and preparation of the actual attack. But I'm sure you'll address that and other topics. So over to you, please, my friend.

MALONEY: [inaudible]

O'HANLON: This is Mike O'Hanlon again. I'm afraid I'm losing Suzanne. I don't know if the rest of you as well. Yeah, yeah.

SACHS: Yeah, yeah.

O'HANLON: I don't know if Molly is already on the call, but if she is, I'll go to her. Otherwise, we'll start to address some of the questions that have come in while we await a better connection from Suzanne. Molly, are you there yet?

REYNOLDS: I am here. I am happy to offer a couple of thoughts on the U.S. domestic political equities here, particularly given this moment in the, in the U.S. Congress. In some ways, everything I'm about to say sort of pales in comparison to what my colleagues have already said. But as we think about the weeks to come, there are a couple big questions on the table from a U.S. domestic perspective.

So one is kind of what are the current sources of dysfunction in Congress that bear on the U.S.'s ability to respond to what is happening? One, as we know, there are a number of key positions, including our ambassador to Israel, that are currently not filled. The Senate has said, several senators have said that they plan to hold hearings sort of as quickly as possible on on Jack Lew's nomination and try to process that quickly. But we are in this moment of kind of particular dysfunction in the confirmation - the nomination and confirmation process in the Senate. And so we're seeing kind of the consequences of that with some of these key unfilled positions. Obviously,

there's also Senator Tommy Tuberville's widespread blockade on a whole range of military promotions that may or may not be relevant as well. Over in the House, the House is currently operating without a full permanent speaker of the House after Kevin McCarthy was deposed last week. There are some open questions about what authorities Patrick McHenry, who is acting as the speaker pro-tem, what authorities he has. I think the most important thing for listeners to remember there is that there are House rules and they are being interpreted in a particular way. But ultimately, McHenry's powers in the House are a question for the House itself. And so if there were to be a situation where something was judged that they want to try to bring something to the floor of the House while there is still a speaker pro tem and not a permanent speaker, that's a matter for the House to decide. And it's, like I said, there are the rules, but ultimately the interpretation of the rules is up to the to the full chamber.

And then the last thing I'll say is sort of the question of what is necessary and when. I'm, as not a subject matter expert, I don't know what needs what needs to happen or what would require congressional action in terms of additional aid. So it may well be the case that particularly on the speakership front, some of that gets resolved before Congress really needs to take action. But that's also sort of looming out there as a third, I think, really relevant, relevant question and when and how it interacts with these other two sources of ongoing dysfunction with the the the the speakership in the House and the confirmation challenges in the Senate. But that is that's that those are the things I'll be paying attention to.

O'HANLON: Thank you very much, Molly. And I know that you and I have to go to another 12:30 meeting, but Suzanne's going to come in now and then between Suzanne, Natan, and Shibley, they'll field audience questions. So, Suzanne, over to you.

MALONEY: Great. Thanks so much. And I'm so sorry for the technical difficulties earlier in the conversation. And I'm sorry that I know we'll be losing Mike O'Hanlon in just a few moments and I want to make sure that he gets another chance to jump in with any points he might want to make before he has to go to his next meeting.

But I did want to say a few words about the Iran side of the puzzle, because obviously from the moment that I saw the reports of what was happening in Israel in the middle of the night here in Washington on Friday, early Saturday morning, it was clear to me that there would be sort of the question of Iran looming large over everything that was happening. Iran is the main funder of Hamas. It equips Hamas, including and trains Hamas as well as many other Palestinian militant groups. And there is, in fact, a considerable amount of coordination on both strategy as well as operations. I want to be clear that there's never been any evidence that Tehran directs the every move of its proxies. There's a considerable degree of operational autonomy on the part of each of these organizations. But frankly, over the course of the Syrian civil war, as Iran mobilized a transnational Shia militia to help keep Bashar Assad in power, its connections to all the various militant groups across the broader Levant has become much stronger and has become, has involved much more intense and ongoing coordination at the operational level. And so it's very clear to me that it would be inconceivable for an assault on this scale to have been undertaken by Hamas without some foreknowledge and almost certainly complicity on the part of Iran. Obviously, there are some news reports out there that are more specific to that that suggest a very detailed involvement of the Iranians with the planning of this attack. If that's the case, then I think, as Natan says, we are in an entirely different universe than anything we've ever seen before. I don't know how to validate those reports. I take them very seriously. And I think that there's a considerable amount of circumstantial evidence in the meetings of Hamas leadership with Iranian leaders recently. Some of the statements that came out of Hamas in the early hours after the first assault. And so I think that there's quite enough reason to believe that Iran has its hand in this in some way. But how direct? We will wait to see. The Biden administration at this stage has said it has not seen that specifically. So I think that that's an important caveat to note.

I would note that the Iranians are going to milk this for everything that they can, and they already are. You see newspapers celebrating the death toll reaching 1000. It's horrific, the response that we've seen on social media as well as in the media. I would not extend that to the Iranian people. There are some video clips from a football soccer game of Iranian teams yesterday

that in fact, suggest that Iranians, the Iranian population has a very different position both on this conflict and on Hamas in particular. And so I think it's very important not to attribute the perspective of the Iranian leadership to the population writ large. But I do think Iran will have a role to play as this conflict evolves. As both Natan and Shibley alluded, there's the possibility of a wider war. The question of what Hezbollah does is going to involve Iran directly because they are so closely tied. There will be a temptation, I think, to open up a second front. But I think there's also some lessons learned from the 2006 war. And on the Iranian side, they may want to try to keep Hezbollah on the sidelines, if only as insurance against some future Israeli strike on the nuclear program. The Iranians themselves make an art form of avoiding any direct conflict with Israel, which of course serves their interest best to light the fire, then stand back from the flames. I think we have to be on guard for the possibility that there will be those in Israel and elsewhere who see either the utility or the need to respond to Iran directly. That may involve hitting Iranian targets in Syria if this war evolves and widens. I would be very surprised if it involved hitting Iran directly itself.

Final point is that, and I think we'll soon will get into some of this, is just you know, from my perspective, I think that this really exposes how misguided U.S. strategy toward the region has been over the course of the past year or so. There has been this illusion that the United States could extricate itself from the region entirely in order to focus on the more urgent priorities of Russia and China. That's perfectly understandable. We've had a very difficult 20 years in the Middle East, but I think at the same time, the exit strategy wasn't a stable or sustainable one. Creating some kind of a normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is a, it would be a positive outcome. But that as well as the efforts to essentially find some quiet understandings with the Iranians to de-escalate their own activities, I think created an incentive structure for both the Iranians and some of their militant allies around the region to go for broke, to blow things up, and to hope that they emerge the victors. I'll stop there and look forward to the rest of the conversation.

O'HANLON: Suzanne, thank you. Although that's a sobering way to end, but perhaps not inappropriate at this juncture. Let me add one thought in response to a couple of the audience questions, then I will bow out and hand back to you, Suzanne, to moderate with all the questions we got from the audience already and any more that may come in. There were a couple of questions about whether there is any linkage here to the Ukraine issue and also how Biden and his foreign policy more broadly will be seen in light of this tragedy. And I guess I have a couple of scattershot thoughts. One is that we've seen Middle East wars before that move quickly. And even though I don't think this will end quickly in a political sense, I think it will move quickly militarily. And most people will support the United States providing munitions and other help to Israel so Israel can continue on with its operation. That will likely become controversial for the kind of reasons that Shibley alluded to at some future point. But the overall thrust of that effort will, I think, continue and receive bipartisan support. I don't think it will complicate Biden's path forward on that issue itself. Some people will indeed blame Biden for having somehow caused this because of the release of billions of dollars in Iranian assets. Except we know now that Iran hasn't actually received those assets and didn't need them for this operation, even if it was partly behind it. And so it's going to really, I think, affect the broader Iran debate in the way that Suzanne just got at more than it's going to really be an effective game of blamesmanship. The blamesmanship may happen, but I think it will not be the most consequential aspect of what's just tragically begun in Israel and Gaza.

The more important question is going to be, again, how do you try to build some kind of a semi-stable outcome and and try to coach Israel and other participants towards that kind of an outcome as the days and weeks go by? But I would be surprised if the whole debate about who caused this winds up settling on anybody except Iranian leaders and Hamas. And then finally, on the Ukraine question, again, I think wars in the Middle East don't always move fast, but the offensive parts tend to go quickly, unlike the Ukraine war, where things are very slow. And so I don't know that Biden will either be hurt or helped by somehow trying to link these issues together with some kind of a broader redefinition of his foreign policy or his mandate for president, to be a national security president and we have to buckle down and view these as sort of Churchillian times. I don't I don't really anticipate that. And I don't think that there's going to be too much

analogy between the Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts for Biden to milk. There may be some legislative actions that become possible to tie the two issues together for appropriations. And maybe that'll be the most consequential way in which the issues could be interlinked. But I think what Biden really needs, as I've tried to argue today in The Hill newspaper, is a way to answer the question of how long will Ukraine last at this level of effort. That's the piece that he hasn't yet explained. And the crisis in Gaza is not going to help him with that explanation. So I think I'll stop there and hand back to you, Suzanne.

MALONEY: Thanks so much, Mike. And I'm glad that we were able to bring you back on to the conversation. I want to turn back to Natan and perhaps ask you to say a few more words about what might shape the Israeli response and how you expect things to evolve.

SACHS: Thanks, Suzanne. If I may, I'll just follow up on something that Mike said, a couple of things. One, on the Ukraine question, there is one important linkage, which is that the Biden administration has already started working to supply Israel with things it needs, as we've seen in the press. But of course, the United States is limited in what it has. It's been supplying an enormous amount of munitions and equipment in general to Ukraine, as have other allies. And that puts a limitation. Israel usually would be okay in most of these scenarios, but of course, it depends whether Hezbollah joins. If it does, then there are limits to to material. And I'd add also the issue of Iron Dome. It is possible, one of the darker scenarios that Israelis are considering is that Hezbollah is waiting and hoping to see Israel's Iron Dome systems depleted with the attacks with the rockets from Gaza. We saw the very first day on Saturday, over 2000 rockets from Gaza by mostly Hamas, which is an enormous amount for one day. And we saw some hits even in Tel Aviv, etc.. If Iron Dome was depleted, that would open more opportunity for Hezbollah, which has far more rockets than does Hamas. Some of them may be accurate missiles, we don't know. And of course, it's not only Iron Dome, there are other systems, depending on which rocket rocket it is. But these are very costly and they are limited. In the past, we've seen the United States, controversially for some people, resupply Israel on that or help resupply of that. That might be a bit harder today. It also, of course, touches on the questions of Israel's non-supply of Iron Dome to Ukraine. In the past, one of the arguments was that Israel wants to keep it for itself. And I think Israelis are happy about the decision today, whether or not they were right about their approach to Ukraine.

I'd say about what will define the decisions, there's a lot of bewilderment in Israel right now. Civil society has come forward quite dramatically. We've seen people come together to bring supplies. And even more than that, we've seen reservists not called up, simply show up, do some of the duties in the south. There are a few famous cases, especially of generals in their sixties, putting on their general uniform - they are reservists - putting on their general uniform and going down south. One of them, Yair Golan, former deputy chief of staff, who was also later a Knesset member from Meretz, the left-wing party, showed up, gathered a few soldiers around him, and started extracting people from the music festival. The latest we hear is that probably over 250 people were killed in that music festival and maybe other things, terrible things happened as well. And of course, many abductees. He simply went in. And one famous case is a journalist calling him. He didn't know him, the journalist, but he simply called him and said, I know where my son is exactly, but the military just won't let me go, won't let me get in and no one is getting out. He said, Give me the coordinates. And he literally brought him back. This is a journalist and analyst. Another journalist and analyst who many of us know very well, because he was stationed in Washington, D.C., Amir Tibon. He was holed up for 10 hours with his daughters in their kibbutz, which is right by the Gaza Strip. There were five Hamas soldiers around firing and killing many in that kibbutz. Finally, soldiers showed up and it was his father, another retired general, who showed up, leading them in. All this to say that we have a lot of sort of civilians and reservists performing things, but the state has the idea of the state protecting its people, organizing, even taking care now to organize the names of the missing to to connect families with with the fate of their loved ones. All this has been extraordinarily slow and a deep, deep crisis of faith by the Israeli people. We can see it now toward toward the state and towards the military. That said, that won't last too long.

Israelis, as we even see from these stories, they come together very strongly. There's a very strong sense of of commonwealth, of mutual compact, taking care of each other. It's a very

strong thing in Israel. And I wish it encompassed all Israelis, but it encompasses most Israelis. And and that I think we're going to see coming forward, that leads - sorry, a very long way of answering a question, Suzanne - that leads in two different directions that I think I mentioned. One is people feel that this has happened to them because they know people in the south, because it could have been them. And if they live in the north and it could be them tomorrow with Hezbollah. There's 10 million people who haven't slept in three days and because of the nightmares, even if they can't get to. So that would lead, unfortunately, or I don't know, towards a very aggressive approach. On the other hand, the same combat, the same sense of responsibility and mutual responsibility also leads to a deep sense of responsibility for the hostages. You will recall that when one soldier, Gilad Shalit, was abducted in 2006, Israel eventually, years later, gave back over a thousand Hamas and related prisoners. One of them, Yahya Sinwar, is now head of Hamas in Gaza. That's the main goal for Hamas in all this is to get prisoners out. So that was for one soldier. And now we're talking about, well, probably well over 100 mostly civilians, as I mentioned. That would entail Israel being very careful, Israel negotiating. What will win the day? I don't know. It depends partly on timing. It depends also on who's making the decisions. We're seeing now negotiations in Israel to bring Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot who's with Benny Gantz in the same party, both of them former chiefs of staff of the military to join the cabinet on an ad hoc basis as ministers without portfolio to join a war cabinet together with Netanyahu in the Ministry of Defense. Yair Lapid has signaled that he's willing to do so, but only if the most extreme ministers are are fired. I think we will probably - we may, I don't know, but we may see this kind of national unity government. Who is in charge right now is even a question. Clearly, Netanyahu is. But who's around him besides Yoav Gallant, the minister of defense who's a former general as well. This is an open question. So a lot of uncertainty. The one certainty is that the response will be very hard. And I'm sorry, I'm going on for so long.

MALONEY: Thanks, Natan, that was really informative and so I'm glad you went on for so long. And I'm now going to ask Shibley to jump back in. And Shibley, I'd really be interested in your assessment of what's happening within the Palestinian leadership at this point. Obviously, that has been a source of some anxiety for all those of us who watch the region for quite some time. Give us a sense of of what's happening with with the on the West Bank as well as what's happening, what you might imagine would be happening among the leadership of Hamas.

TELHAMI: Yeah, I think, you know, it's interesting. I was there last week. I was in Israel and the West Bank last week. And, you know, there were two things that were very clear. One is the degree of despair that you find in the West Bank. Obviously, they're facing escalating settler violence there, settlement encroachment even in East Jerusalem. And they are having no confidence in the Palestinian Authority. It's become, you know, you know, people who typically are very opposed to Hamas and certainly don't do anything militant have been very critical of the Authority's inability to to lead, and and they saw it more and more as a subcontractor for Israeli security. So the Authority was already not very credible among many people in the West Bank. And I think when you see the timing of Hamas doing this, I've always been saying the timing of Hamas carrying out an operation of this sort isn't hard to explain. It was really the capability that is hard to explain. I mean, if they if we knew they had the capability to do something like this two years ago, we'd have predicted it almost immediately. But now, obviously, you know, the public, in the Palestinian public, wanted somebody to do something because they were just giving up. They're basically been under occupation 56 years. And now it looks even worse, particularly given the rise of the far-right Israeli government and the that, you know, the Arab states are making peace at their expense. And no one was coming to their aid. They were expecting Biden to be more forward-leaning in trying to address the problem. And so there was an incredible despair because they're facing this every single day. I mean, you know, we're talking about these are the daily lives of people under occupation, not like they're, it's passive in the sense that there's no active fighting, because there is fighting anyway taking place or or violence taking place. But but the day-to-day life is is it for them is intolerable. It's in fact, hard to to understand how they can tolerate it with their kids and, you know, for so many years. But that's where Hamas' thing comes in. You know, whatever their aim is, whether it's political, whether it's tactical, whether it's strategic, whether they have political aims, there is no question that that this has made them popular, not because people like what they do, in fact people are actually dismissing the idea that they're attacking civilians in many ways. And they're what you find is they wanted somebody to do

something. Just like now you hear the Israelis feeling absolutely vulnerable in their own condition, watching people, civilians in towns, being helpless and the government not coming to help and no one coming to help them. They want to carpet bomb. The instinct is to do something. And those who do something, you know, gain points. And so this is obviously coming at the expense of the Palestinian Authority, because Hamas right now, it's top in not just among Palestinians, but you could see even among, you know, in the region public opinion, this issue has risen in a way that has clearly reshuffled the political deck in a way that now makes governments who have strategic interest in making peace with Israel without major concessions to the Palestinians, now have to think twice about it because the public has been mobilized. So that that's something that's important to keep in mind as a context, not as an explanation necessarily for why Hamas did. And it's --

MALONEY: Shibley, can I actually push back on you just a little bit? I mean, the horrific nature of this attack, obviously, we know Hamas is a violent movement and it has perpetrated terrorist attacks on Israelis over decades. But this is some of the reports that we're seeing and are just so barbaric, the kidnaping of large numbers of people. Is there no possibility that this backfires with Palestinian publics? And please, if you could speak to, you know, sort of what's the play from Mahmoud Abbas or anyone on the West Bank who might be able to exert some responsible leadership on behalf of the Palestinian people at this stage?

TELHAMI: You know, Suzanne, I wish it would, because obviously those of us who care about human rights think that just should be front and center. Condemn -- there should be no targeting of civilians under any circumstances, no matter what the cause. No cause justifies targeting civilians or jeopardizing them recklessly. That should be a principle that we, everybody should should put front and center. And that's why I even started with that, because I think that is something that the moral position, the consistent position has to be taken. What I'm saying is, unfortunately, in a situation of conflict and pain, hearts hardened and it's awful when they do. This is this is something that's why I think as leadership or as people have to take a stand and make sure that it's, you know, take them away from it. So do I have hope that some people are going to say this is just too far? People in pain don't necessarily see that. You have people who do that. Of course, you you, you you will have people who condemn it. But the general public in general, I'm not sure. And you could see the same debate in Israel right now. I'm watching Israeli TV regularly. And I was there, you know, last week in Israel itself as well. And I think what you find is that, you know, there, people are focused on their own pain, on their own suffering. And when that suffering is immense, as we have witnessed now, they just don't care so much about the other. And that's, again, why it's the responsibility of of leaders, but especially third-party leaders, to keep that front and center. So to me, the question is not military deterrence as such. Of course, military deterrence is important. You know, I'm a realist, I know how that works. But the problem at the core is not one of military deterrence. It was not a normal situation when you have a blockade of Gaza for 20 years and people in there, I think we have to understand that we need to find a political horizon. It's not, this is not going to be solved militarily. Palestinians are going to pay the price.

MALONEY: OK, Shibley, I'm going to just try to shift gears for just a moment because we've got a lot of questions coming in, and typically we keep these things going for about an hour, so we only have about 15 minutes left for our discussion. So I'm actually going to take a question that came in to me from one of our listeners. Should we think that Iran is pursuing an understandable geopolitical objective or is the Iranian government pursuing essentially a theocratic objective? And to what extent can we predict Iranian, Iran's behavior? I think that, you know, this is a theocratic state. There is always a sort of overlay of ideology to everything that the Iranian government does. But in fact, this is very much, I think, a strategic play on the part of the Iranians to the extent that they either signed off on this attack or in some way helped to plan or at least provided the means for those who did undertake it to have the impacts that they've had. For the Iranians, you know, they they win when there's chaos in the region, or at least for the Iranian government, they win when there is chaos in the region. It enables them to advance their own influence. That's certainly what has worked for them very successfully in Iraq and Syria. And their greatest adversary, there, the greatest challenge to their own ability to dominate the region is, in fact from Israel, which has been very effective at setting back Iran's nuclear program, at curtailing

some of Iran's adventurism in Syria and elsewhere, and, of course, is very vocal on the international stage in opposition to Iranian government policies. And so, you know, where there's an opportunity to hit hard at Israel, particularly at a time when Israel was experiencing considerable domestic turmoil. I think that this is something that the Iranian leadership absolutely would have sought for geopolitical reasons in hopes of essentially gaining greater advantage and leverage over its core adversary in the region.

So, in that sense, I think that, you know, this is part of a larger strategy on the part of the Iranian government. They believe that, in fact, the West is a crumbling power and that, you know, they've aligned themselves closely with both Russia and China. They're providing critical military equipment, training and involvement with Russia's war in Ukraine. That is not accidental. It is very much part of a worldview of the Iranian leadership, which has persuaded them to align with other authoritarian powers and to find every opportunity to try to hit back against the West.

I do want to move on from myself now, having dominated the mic for just a few moments and perhaps bring Natan back into the conversation. And just wondering for you if you could say a few words about what this might mean for the for the much-vaunted normalization opportunity that had, that the Biden administration had been pushing between the Saudis and the Israelis? I've got some views on that as well. But I want to give you your chance at the mic and I'll come in and perhaps Shibley will want to say a few words on that as well.

SACHS: Thanks, Suzanne. Yeah, I think Shibley's views are important here. He also has a lot of insight on U.S. public opinion on this. We saw since the summer, since the early summer, a very strong push by the administration to explore whether an Israeli-Saudi normalization could be reached, which would entail a mega-deal, as some people have called it, between the United States and Saudi Arabia as well. I won't get into too much detail that we can, but this, of course, was very fraught and a very difficult proposition. It included the civilian nuclear program by the Saudis, which, you know, could become not-civilian at some point, and but also a military pact between the United States and Saudi Arabia. The military pact also means, if it was an actual treaty, would mean Senate approval with a supermajority in the Senate. The Senate has become crucial. So we, Shibley and I both have actually spent a lot of time on this in recent months. And and I think that was it was always a very difficult proposition, but one that certainly the White House was pushing very hard. A lot of people have said this ends that story. I think it's certainly true it ends it in the short term. The Israeli government has absolutely no time to deal with anything, and it's really no political space or will or anything like that. This is completely consuming. And I would say on the Saudi side - Shibley, of course, can tell us much better. But I think on the Saudi side, of course, the images that are already coming out of coming out of Gaza and unfortunately tragically are going to come out in the next few weeks or more are going to be such that there won't be any space for anything like this. But, the Saudi-Israeli-American deal was never premised on public opinion, for one thing, in Saudi Arabia, and it was never premised on any love lost between MBS and Hamas or anything like that. So the fundamental parameters here may still be in place. What is not in place is, first, the timing as I said.

Second, the politics. Netanyahu - I've have already predicted his political demise in the past and I've vowed never to do so again. So I'll just say that many other people have said that is a Golda Meir walking. Golda Meir was the prime minister in 1973, and after the war, she was politically done. She actually won an election, but she was politically done and resigned. Netanyahu was already weak for some reasons, but this absolute debacle is is likely the [inaudible] political end of him, eventually. So that's one thing. And the second is, the American political cycle is very different. We're approaching election year very soon. And then there's a lot of politics involved, both for the Biden administration and the Senate. So, in short, I think it certainly puts it on hold. And that hold could be a long time. While this war continues, it's simply not not on the table. I'm not sure it changes any of the fundamentals, but the timing was a crucial thing, so postponed by three months, that may mean a year and a half. When will it come back? I don't know. There are many reasons it could, many it wouldn't. I think a Palestinian component of that would be extremely important. And what that might look like could also be very different as a consequence of this war.

MALONEY: Shibley, did you want to speak to the Saudi position?

TELHAMI: Yes. So I think - I agree with what Natan said. Just a couple of more things. One is that, you know, the strategic interest for the Saudis remains. Obviously, that's something that won't go away. And those interests don't necessarily coincide much with the Palestinian issue, but they were assuming that they need a big fig leaf for their own public opinion because the public still cares about the Palestinian issue. And now this, you know, this war is going to make this center stage. It's going to make it much harder for them to maneuver regardless of what Israel wants, or the U.S. wants. At this point, it makes it difficult. Now, they don't like Hamas and they don't like that this could play into Iran's hands. So it's not like they're rooting for Hamas in any shape or form. But the bottom line is that on this issue, I think they're, you know, limited right now because of public opinion.

Now, with regard to American public opinion, the Biden administration, I never thought there was any win for the Biden administration on this politically. They were doing it for you know, one could argue for different kinds of reasons. And public opinion, I've been doing public opinion, actually we're going to release a poll pretty soon on this. You know, it doesn't really follow this very closely. There's not much opposition, but there's not much support for a deal if you don't tell the public that the U.S., the U.S. is being asked to help build a civilian nuclear program in Saudi Arabia or provide security guarantees. When you provide that, there's more opposition to it. So I think the question is how what would happen in Congress? We do know that the even under the best of circumstances, without this war, there would have been some opposition in Congress, obviously partisan opposition, but even many Democrats like a 20 letter from Democratic senators going to the administration saying basically to what's in it for us. So I think that this definitely puts it off for a while. I don't think it's likely to happen any time soon.

MALONEY: I'll just toss out my own perspective on this, which is that I think it was a super clever plan. And I think that American super-clever plans seldom survive encounters with reality in the Middle East. And so I was skeptical from the beginning. I think it's hard for me to imagine if this conflict evolves the way that we expect that it will, that the conditions will be ripe for some kind of a public rapprochement of a historic nature between Israeli and Saudi leaders, despite, as you both rightly note, the fact that there may be still very strong self-interests from both sides in seeing something like this. I think it also, you know, is frankly less valuable to the United States today than it might have been before this recent escalation. Fundamentally, the driver of trying to press for this historic entente was as a means of trying to extricate the United States from the presence and engagement that we had previously had over the course of the post-9/11 era in the region. And I think that for the foreseeable future, the Middle East is back on the president's agenda, whether he likes it or not.

I would also say that there are some, I think, significant negative domestic political fallout for the Biden administration. There's obviously been a lot of focus on the fact that there have been these efforts to de-escalate with Iran, including a deal that released a number of Americans who had been held unjustly in Iranian prisons, in some cases for as long as eight years. Iran was given access to \$6 billion in oil revenues that had been frozen in escrow accounts in South Korea in exchange for their release. I think it will be much, much more difficult for the Biden administration to do any kind of follow-up deals, as had been hoped with the Iranians. And and, you know, unfortunately, what it means is that the Iranians are probably going to try to find other ways to get back on the international community's agenda by potentially resuming some of the harassment and targeting of tankers in the Gulf and and efforts to to put pressure on the region and the international community as a whole.

We are coming to the close of our hour. We have a still a great audience and so I'm really grateful for all of you, those of you who stuck with us through my technical issues and the many colleagues that we've been able to get into the conversation, either through their questions. I'm going to ask both Natan and Shibley, starting with Shibley, to just say one quick word about what they're going to be watching for next over the next few days. What are the key issues that

they will that will help them to understand and that can help all of us to understand how this may evolve? First to you, Shibley, and then over to Natan.

TELHAMI: Let me just say something that may be a little bit more positive note, and that is more -- in a very gloomy, obviously picture that terrifies me in terms of watching it. I think this is a moment possibly if the Obama administration is smart enough, it has obviously been dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli issue in a very mild way. This is an opportunity for them as things progressed and we get into a crisis and there is no military solution, they can still use the possible deal with the Saudis in a much bigger way to address the Palestinian-Israeli issue. And because there's likely to be far more openness in Israel. And just in the same way it happened, the opening happened, after the 1973 war. And I think they need to think big, not smaller.

MALONEY: Natan, the last word to you.

SACHS: Um, it's, you know, it's a moment of mostly just tragedy and, unfortunately, unfolding tragedy. I think when when journalists get access to to the vicinity of the Gaza Strip, the images may be even more horrific. And I think for all of us it's incumbent - I think Shibley touched on this - really distinguish both between the moral outrage, which is in order and may entail some policy, between that and what sound policy is. It's extremely hard thing to do when blood boils. But the policy is not about satisfying emotions, it's about thinking about how to create things better. And so I hope - I have limited hope, but I nonetheless hope - that through this terrible mayhem that we're going to see unfolding now, we can see still some rational thinking come through on all sides that will allow more fruitful path going forward. I don't know what the Israeli objectives will end up being. I do hope that on the other side something can be rebuilt in terms of life for Israelis, for Gazans who've been in a terrible situation for, well, well over a decade now. More like two. It's very grim, of course, but sometimes from the grimmest scenarios, you can find some change. And I think in Israel, we're really seeing the seeds of major change to come. We'll probably have to go through some terrible times in the meantime. But as difficult as it is, I think thinking about policy and in particular, those who are practicing it there, this is actually the most important time for them to do it right. So I leave with a note of hope that perhaps with all the barbarity we're seeing, we can still find some some sound policy somewhere. I say this probably to convince myself as much as anyone else.

MALONEY: Well, thank you so much to both you, Natan Sachs, director of the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, and Shibley Telhami, our nonresident senior fellow at Brookings and also the Anwar Sadat chair at the University of Maryland and many other titles. Our colleagues Mike O'Hanlon, research director for the Foreign Policy program and Phil Knight chair in defense and strategy, as well as Molly Reynolds, a senior fellow in our Governance Studies program at Brookings. Thank you very much for joining. And I know you're already on another meeting with our colleagues. So just thanks to all of you. I'm glad that we were able to end on a positive, hopeful note after a truly somber and distressing several days of news coverage. Let me just say that Brookings will continue to follow this issue very closely. Please watch our web site and our Twitter feed for more publications, podcasts and events that we'll be doing to take stock of what's happening and to hopefully move the policy in the most positive direction possible for all the people of the region. Thank you all very much.

SACHS: Thank you very much.