

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Peter Berkowitz on Israel at War

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today by an old friend, Peter Berkowitz, with whom we've had two previous conversations, I believe, in studio pre-pandemic, one on higher education, one on liberalism, both of which stand up very well, I've got to say. I looked quickly at them and also, which remain both very important topics as we speak here early in the new year of 2024. But we're not talking about that today. Peter is a senior fellow at Hoover, at the Hoover Institution, was director of policy planning for 2019 to 2021 at the State Department, a distinguished academic career, at least some excellent essays in the book *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*.

Before that, a book on Nietzsche, so, many arrows there in your quiver. But I thought today we would talk about Israel with Peter because A, he knows a ton about Israel has been there many times, has written about it, has studied there, has lectured and taught there. And is just back from Israel. And obviously it's a very interesting and important moment in the history of Israel. And so, I wanted to pick Peter's brain, what he learned from his, I guess two weeks over there from which you just returned a couple of days ago. Is that right? So welcome back.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Thank you very much. It's good to be with you, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

And great to have you here. So, I don't know, you and I have been to Israel a fair amount. You've been many more times and you have the language much better. I was so impressed. Once we were together, I don't know if you remember this. We were at a conference in Israel, I don't know, 15 years ago maybe. And we both got requests to do interviews on Israeli TV talk shows, separate ones I think. And I remember getting advice from you, you'd been in Israel more than I had, had done more of that sort of stuff in Israel and kind of what is it different from Israel? And I said, "I guess I'll just speak English." And they all understand that, of course. And you were very kind said, "Yeah, that'll be fine." I mean, I'll be doing it in Hebrew you said, because you actually know the language well. So I've never stopped being impressed by that somehow. And you did it. I remember watching you and there you were so... anyway.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Holding forth.

BILL KRISTOL:

Holding forth. Exactly. So hold forth. So, you just got back 48 hours ago. What's it like? You've been so many times before. How is it different? What surprised you? What struck you?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Well, of course I've been following the news very closely since October 7th, since I woke up on October 7th. And my email box, text messages were flooded with notices that war had broken out in Israel. And of course, I had actually been following events in Israel, especially closely

since January 4th of now last year of 2023, when the government announced — Yariv Levin, the defense minister announced a raft — of sweeping proposals for an overhaul of the judicial system in Israel, as you know.

BILL KRISTOL:

Justice minister, right?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yeah, yeah. Justice Minister Yariv Levin. And this almost immediately provoked immense controversy, outrage on the opposition side, the government side dug in. It polarized Israel to an extent that we hadn't seen before. Although polarization had been growing in Israel as by the way it's been growing throughout Western style liberal democracies over the last several years. And it was amid this great polarization, which had not ceased on midnight October 6th, that Israel suffered, as many people have pointed out, the worst one-day loss of civilian Jewish life since the Holocaust. In the short run, as many people have noted, Israel, especially Israeli civil society, really rallied together.

The country was traumatized, the government mobilized more than 300,000 reservists within five days. By the end of the first week after the attacks, Tel Aviv restaurants were full of lawyers during the day, lawyers and doctors and business executives, high-tech guys, men and women volunteering to prepare meals for the soldiers, cooking, chopping vegetables, cleaning floors, doing everything that's necessary to produce this massive amount of food because the army was not prepared to feed so many people. So Israeli society really rallied together. This has given the impression in some quarters in the United States and outside of Israel, that the old disputes are behind. Well, one thing I learned while I was in Israel is that the old disputes, the old enmities, the bitternesses, the grievances have not disappeared. The country, the traumatized and heartbroken country came together in order to fight off what many regard, legitimately I think, as an existential threat from the Iran-backed Hamas.

But on top of all the old grievances that the judicial controversy put out into the open is a new one. Opposition, people in the opposition, are now inclined also to blame the government for making Israel weak and unprepared. And so opening it up to the attack from Hamas. Meanwhile, government and its backers are blaming the opposition for making Israel weak, unraveling preparedness and opening it up to the horrendous assault on October 7th. So while Israel has the Israeli armed force, defense forces have fought, I think, with great valor in the Gaza Strip and are engaged in a kind of warfare that goes even beyond what the United States in Mosul, Fallujah and Iraq. There is reason to be worried in Israel that, that the anger, the division within political society is going to return and return with a vengeance in the coming weeks as more reservist return from the front.

BILL KRISTOL:

So we'll certainly come back to that and to the whole question of what underlies sort of the divisions and is it a fight about policy, judicial reform or is it a much deeper cultural and social division and all that. But just practically, I mean, what's it like? So, a large number of young men and women are mobilized. I mean, do you feel that you're in a wartime? You were mostly in Tel Aviv, I think, but also traveling.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

I was mostly in Tel Aviv, but here's an example of how it feels like wartime. So I also traveled to visit friends in Haifa and friends in Ashdod. Another friend joked, "Ah, you visited the Northern and Southern borders of the country now." What lies behind the mordant joke is that the Northern strip of Israel has been evacuated 80 to 100,000 people too close to a frontline with Hezbollah. And of course, Southwestern Israel near the Gaza Strip has been

evacuated another 100,000. This is where the massacres took place. So, it can be very confusing. On the one hand, you sit with your friends in the relative safety of their homes. I was in a beautiful home in Haifa. We went out other friends in Ashdod, out to a fine fish restaurant, Pescado, and not far from the Namal, the port there. And much of the conversation is conversation that ordinary people in peacetime would have, but looming over everything is war, is the danger of rockets and missiles.

For example, my first step off the airplane at Ben Gurion Airport from the gate, loud alarms went off in the airport. So as we were walking down the corridor, which was nearly empty except for our flight, a woman, she must've been in her 60s, came to guide all of the passengers, 300 people from this jumbo jet to a safe room. Now, the safe room in the corridor, as you're exiting the airplane on the way to passport control turns out to be the bathrooms. And the bathrooms in this corridor do not fit 300 people. So you have the spectacle of 20, 30 people crammed into the bathrooms. Another 200 some odd people along the lines. The poor clerk, the woman who was guiding us to the so-called safe area, did not know much English. And the English-speaking passengers were saying, "What's going on? What's going on?" And she could only answer, "boom, boom," and point to the bathrooms, a crazy scene. And—

BILL KRISTOL:

You mentioned the airport. Am I right? I hadn't realized this until I saw something just yesterday. I guess El Al is the, am I right about this, El Al is the only airline flying that United and Delta and so forth and other European airlines are not flying into Tel Aviv [inaudible]?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

That's still true. United, most of the major other airlines canceled their flights shortly after the October 7th attacks. United reinstated their flights starting in mid-December, but after a few weeks they canceled them, those mid-December flights again. I think United is scheduled to resume flights now in mid-January. But you're quite right, Bill, that for those of us who've been more than a few times or really to any major airport, it's stunning to pull into the gate and see all the other gates empty or really see only one company's airplanes at your particular terminal, El Al's. So that's right. It's El Al entering and El Al exiting almost exclusively.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I guess that in businesses, and even in cafes and stuff, so many people are mobilized that there are lots of people just not there. I mean, we forget it's a small country and it's a citizen army. So people compare it to 9/11 here or even other things. But I suppose it's more like, I don't know, World War II where everyone knows someone who's mobilized and there are empty desks in every office complex because people have been called up and so forth.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

That's absolutely right. Although Tel Aviv has a paradoxical aspect now, because while there are virtually no tourists, there are, on the other hand, 200,000 or so displaced Israelis from the North and South. So some of those people are in Tel Aviv, the office buildings are... The businesses from high-tech business to small businesses are hurting and hurting badly because of the massive call-up and the hotels and the restaurants are hurting. And also because many people just don't feel like going out these days. And understandably so, and I want to emphasize your point about Israel being a small country, a little over 9 million people right now. Everybody, every family in Israel has a father, a son, or a brother who is serving or a cousin or a nephew. Every morning on the front page of the paper above the fold are the faces of another three or four or however many beautiful young men and women who have fallen in battle in Gaza Strip.

So you know Israel has women in combat roles. In fact, you can find on YouTube a short 10-minute clip about Israel's first female tank unit that they drove their tanks six, seven miles over roads and sand to get to Kibbutzim on the morning of October 7th and saved tens of lives by doing so. But in any case, should emphasize your point, which is yes, the immediate loss and grief strikes virtually every family. Nobody doesn't know somebody's family who has lost a loved one. And addition to that, Israel's fighting a kind of war it's never fought before, at least since the 1948 War of Independence, Israel hasn't absorbed casualties on its own territory as it did on the morning of October 7th, even the first day of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Israel's lines and the Western borders of the Sinai were attacked, not inside Israel, not inside homes, not elderly people and parents and children and young men and women. This was not seen something like that.

BILL KRISTOL:

So the mood must be somber and also, I suppose, determined. And the disunity we'll get back to on the sort of, let's call it the political and civil questions. But in terms of the fighting, the determination that this has to be fought, I take it at least from what I'm reading, not that much. Differences may be on how much confidence you have in Netanyahu and other issues like that. But in terms of that this is a just and necessary war, not much difference.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

On this, I could not detect any differences, as you suggest, even most... many hardened leftists are totally outraged by what happened and fully appreciate the necessity to take the war to Hamas. There's unity behind the war goals, which are now to destroy the Hamas leadership, to destroy the ability of Hamas to fight again or to govern in Gaza and to return the hostages. This is— around these goals there's tremendous unity as far as the execution goes, and what plans are going to allow this to happen. Needless to say, there is dispute, but you're quite right. The word somber is a good one. And also we have to add that the somberness is hovering over... The somberness is a fear about the future of Zionism because the first of Zionism's promises — there are many promises — but the first of Zionism's promises was safety in their own country, pogroms, which Jews knew from Europe and not only for Europe, not going to happen in Israel. And many Israelis are still baffled and outraged that such a thing could happen in Israel, and also worry... I throw in another dimension, Pardon the mild rambling here... But when they think about this war, that many Israelis also immediately recognized that this is not a single-front war. It was Hamas's intention to bring into the war Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas and West Bank, or Judea and Samaria, and other Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq and Yemen, which have come in, and Iran itself. The Israeli Minister of Defense Gallant remarked last week that Israel is fighting now in six of the seven fronts of the current war, meaning excluding only Iran. So amidst the somberness of the terrible losses of October 7th and the continuing losses from fallen soldiers is anxiety about this war not being properly characterized as the Iran-Hamas war, but the Israel-Iran war.

BILL KRISTOL:

What is it called there? So here, in the media it's usually Israel-Hamas, I guess. And I don't think that's with bad intentions. I just think it's just an easiest way to say it.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yeah, no, no, no, no. And it captures something important. Yeah. Oh yes, there's Operation... Not Operation War of Iron. Iron Swords, I think.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, so it has a name. But not..

PETER BERKOWITZ:

A name [inaudible]

BILL KRISTOL:

A kind of shorthand.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yeah. When people refer to it on the streets, they just refer to *hamulkhama*, the war. The war. But that itself is a change, because as you know, Bill, since Hamas violently took power in Gaza in 2007, Israel has been compelled to undertake several operations. That's the word they use. *Mif'sa* is the word for operations. Cast Lead in 2008, 2009. Another operation in 2014. Again in 2021. I'm leaving out one or two. In every case, these military actions were called operations. They had limited goals. The limited goal was to degrade Hamas's capacity to strike with rockets. But the goal was always limited. From the first day, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant defined this conflict as a war, and they had totally different aims. This is the first time since Hamas seized power in 2007 that Israel has declared, "Our aim is to eliminate Hamas," so everybody has internalized immediately this time they're at war.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think that point, I hadn't really thought about the future of Zionism point in the sense that obviously, the brutality, the horror of the attacks is shocking here, let alone if you live there and if you know people or know people who know people were involved or victims or present and barely escaped and so forth, to say nothing of hostages. So that part I think is conveyed over here. But the psychological shock of the effect of the attack being on civilians in Israel itself... When people have used the term pogrom, I've been slightly, well, that's a different situation. But in a way, I suppose that part I hadn't really thought about.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yeah. Exactly. I also too hesitated with use of that word. But the more I heard it, the more it seemed to me that it captured something true about this situation as different and distinguished it from the sorts of terrorist attacks that Israel has witnessed through most of its history. This was concerted. This was planned. It had involved huge number of people. 3,000 Hamas fighters breached Israel's security barrier, and they were joined by some, it seemed, ordinary Gazans. And moreover, it's terrible to say, but this is what the film evidence we have shows. The Jihadists reveled in their humiliation, in their mutilation of Jews, reminiscent of European pogroms.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah it is. As you say, it gets so much to the heart of what Zionism was about and is about, I guess, right?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's really striking. So, somber but united on the war, more or less for now.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

And at war. Again, whatever happens, of course there's practical, will it expand to the north and so forth. You can talk about that a bit if you wish. I'm curious to know both what you think, but what do other people think? Well, we're looking at a difficult, very messy, unpleasant for everyone... Unpleasant is such a euphemism on both sides really in terms of the consequences of war in Gaza, or do they expect, unfortunately, a bigger war or are they hoping it can't be? What would you say is the view of both the people you've spoken to in government who really followed this stuff carefully and then on the street about the bigger war question as opposed to not?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

The sense I left with is that the view on the street is actually converging with the view in the military establishment, that a war in the north or on the northern front, since we're dealing with another Iranian proxy, the leading Iranian proxy, is increasingly inevitable. Why is it inevitable? Well, the massacres of October 7th taught the Israelis, they've now internalized it, how vulnerable their border is. There may be tunnels. There are certainly tunnels in the north. Hezbollah has a much larger fighting force than Hamas does, really a trained military. They have massively more rockets, probably in the neighborhood of 150,000. And they have proper intermediate range guided missiles which could set Haifa and Tel Aviv on fire.

So it has now been generally internalized that this situation with Hezbollah sitting on the northern border, you can walk through a park in Metula which is on the northern border in Israel, and you can see Hezbollah's yellow flags a hundred yards from the border. So this represents, Israelis have concluded, both I should say those who live in the area, Israelis in Tel Aviv, and the military establishment, intolerable situation. By the way, it was never supposed to be this way. After Israel's second Lebanon war in 2006, UN Security Council passed a resolution, 1701, which called for placing in southern Lebanon a UN military force that would prevent Hamas from setting up shop south of the Litani River. Well, you're going to—

BILL KRISTOL:

The Litani River's just a few miles north of the border, right?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yeah, yeah, that's right. 10, 15 miles north of the border at the most. And you'll be surprised to learn, no doubt, that the UN force has proved entirely ineffective. Hezbollah sits precisely where the resolution says it may not be located. It's hard to imagine any sort of negotiations resulting in Hezbollah decamping and voluntarily moving itself. So how this is going to be resolved so that the 80 to 100,000 Israelis who have left their homes, have been away from their homes now for closing in on three months, is hard to say, but there is a sense of increasing inevitability of a northern front opening up.

And as I said, that's going to look very different because Hezbollah has such an extraordinary array of projectiles to aim at Israel. Before the IDF could significantly degrade their capacities, rockets and missiles are bound to get through in the event of military conflict and do significant damage to Israel's cities. So the somberness is multi-layered and it includes a reasonable concern that another front will be opened up. Plus, so far, Hamas in Judea, Samaria, in the West Bank, has mostly been deterred significantly because of very aggressive operations by the IDF in those areas. How long this will last is hard to say.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. So the notion that, let's just look at Gaza and that's pretty bad, and let's think about how long it's going to take to clear out tunnels or to get enough leaders so that Israel feels it's done what it has to do. That's only part of the story, and I guess one could argue on the north

that deterrence might work, and you could have a standoff as we have had. The last two and a half months could be prologue, and we could have that for another two and a half or 24 and a half months in the sense of Hezbollah doesn't want to cause too much trouble because they really could be degraded very badly if Israel engages in a full way.

And on the other hand, Israel is okay perhaps with a deterred Hezbollah, and for that matter, deterred Iran behind it. And some people were predicting it would expand in the first week or two that it didn't—

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yes, that's right.

BILL KRISTOL:

... so maybe that's too much confidence over here. I don't know. I have the feeling that the people who care about this, follow this closely in America, including in government, are a little more, from what you're saying, sounds like... I think the American conventional wisdom is still, deterrence might work. A Cold War. It sounds like people in Israel are less confident about that going forward.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

So let's say they're worried. But here's an argument for the deterrence case, but from Israeli point of view. One observation is this, that it's widely believed, I think, in Israel, that one of the reasons that Iran is doing its best to stay the hand of Hezbollah is that the principal purpose of a highly armed Hezbollah on Israel's southern border is to deter Israel from a strike on Iran. If Hezbollah prematurely uses its rockets and missiles and then suffers a devastating blow from Israel, Iran loses a deterrence against a direct strike from Israel on Iran.

And another consideration is that Israel does have to get back to business, so it may well be that Israel's going to find a way to fortify the communities on the northern border, increase the presence of the army there, allow for civilians to carry arms, stand up civilian watch groups to be prepared for attacks from southern Lebanon. I wouldn't be surprised if this, in the end, is the response rather than war, but it doesn't change the sensibility in Israel. The sensibility is a northern front could open up at any moment, and we need to be prepared for that. And that affects our calculations about the kind of country in which we live, and both its strengths and its vulnerabilities.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, so that's very interesting, because it gets to the question of does one go back to October 6th Israel? And it sounds from what you're saying that no. Everyone's made fun of... Fun isn't quite the right word, but noted Jake Sullivan's now infamous comments, the National Security Advisor, about two weeks before the war began that, "well, the Middle East is basically pretty quiet." But to be fair, that was the view here, but it was kind of the view there too in some ways. There were a million challenges as always, but they had deterred both Hezbollah and Hamas mostly. There was a lot of low-grade conflict. Iran was a massive problem, but for now, it didn't seem imminently that it had to be dealt with and so forth. And I guess... Well, I'll ask you. I won't guess anything. How much do people there really... People always say to 9/11, we always say, "Never going to be the same again." But I get the feeling that's more real that it's never going to be the same as it was before in Israel than in some of these other cases.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

I think that's right, and we can both remember back to the September 11th attacks in the United States. And not long after those attacks, within a few days, the Wall Street Journal published a piece, September 10th and September 11th Americans. Some Americans said,

"Things will never be the same." Other Americans said, "Well, we suffered an attack and we'll deal with the attack." For a few months, it seemed that America was not going to be the same. But I think looking back, we can say that many Americans settled into the old patterns of thought, their September 10th patterns of thought, within a few months after the war. Another time to examine that matter.

As far as Israel goes, October 6th and October 7th Israelis, I do think — Who knows what we'll say when we reconvene in 20 years — but I think there's a much likelier case, or at least it's very strongly felt in Israel, I heard this from both sides, from opposition and government people, that this changes everything. We're never going back to the way it was before. That the horrors committed by the people who want to destroy our country, destroy Jews and our country. The enormity of them is too great to ever forget. We have internalized how we are surrounded. We can't go back to the wonderful 20 years or almost 20 years we enjoyed between the end of the second Intifada, say 2004, 2005, the boom times of the high-tech economy and the attacks of October 7th, 2023. We're not going back before then. Security is going to once again be number one consideration as far as the eye can see, but this time it's for a very affluent society that has tasted great success in commercial life.

BILL KRISTOL:

You were part of the administration that helped do some of this, seem to be beginning to normalize relations with some of its neighbors, some of its Arab, not neighbors, countries nearby, important Arab countries. In a way, putting aside the mega big argument about where that goes, that also I think helps someone understand what a shock this is, how different it is right. It wasn't just that they were in a rough situation before 10/7, October 7th and now they're in a rougher situation. It was that they thought they were in a promising and improving situation, I think it's almost fair to say, for all the challenges and now they must feel very differently.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

They feel very differently, but thank you for the opportunity to say something that's not somber and does not reinforce the somberness about Israel's situation. One source of hope for Israel comes from the amazing resiliency of the Israeli people, which is where we began. They've volunteered in great numbers to fight. They've shown great valor in Gaza. Civil society is rallied in countless ways, not just in the restaurants, volunteering to pick the fruit in the fields because not only are 300,000 mobilized, but foreign workers have left the country. Tremendous solidarity on the level of civil society.

BILL KRISTOL:

Just one point on that, then you'll make the point you're about to make. I have been so struck, the opposition, which I probably have been more sympathetic over the last year than the government, for all that they continue to fight the fights about judicial reform and broader fights about the future of the country and for all they think Netanyahu must go and stuff. The degree, I gather, of volunteering to serve, both in military ways and in other ways, there's no difference, right? It's not as if it would be as severe. There are never Trumpers and Trumpers and people in between and they were being attacked and everyone has mobilized... For the polarization, that is really striking to me. Just reading about these major opposition figures who on the one hand give interviews and say, I think Netanyahu must go, but on the other hand are spending their time certainly with relatives in the IDF and so forth, but also just volunteering to help in the effort. That is pretty striking.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Pretty striking in young people and not such young people, rushed back to the country as soon as they got word of the October 7th attacks. It is truly inspiring to watch and a great cause of hope for the future. Not a few people said to me, the response to the war, especially the immediate response to the war, shows that Israel has a sensational people alongside its dysfunctional government and certainly on the question of the sensationalness of the people, yes, I think that has been proven day after day after the October 7th atrocities. Yes, you made the point about the Abraham Accords and the opportunities that Israel was experiencing with the normalization of relations, first with Bahrain and United Arab Emirates and then expanding Sudan and Morocco elsewhere.

We know from this last year that Saudi Arabia has also wanted to normalize relations with Israel. We knew, by the way, that was one of Netanyahu's major goals when he put together his new government. It was a goal that fell by the wayside, seemingly, when the judicial reforms, the judicial overhaul was proposed, but back in January of last year, the Saudi foreign minister at Davos, when asked about normalization with Israel said, "We're very interested. We'd like Israel to show some progress in the political process with the Palestinians." Nothing much happened for nine months. Then again in September, MBS, Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince, let it be known that he was keen as part of a larger security cooperation deal with the United States to proceed to normalization with Israel, provided Israel could demonstrate some progress in the political process with Palestinians. Nothing came to that before October 7th. Now I'm told by Israelis who are familiar with Riyadh's thinking that Saudi Arabia let it be known at the Amman Conference that Secretary of State Blinken attended, now I guess about a month ago, that it was prepared to contribute substantially to the rehabilitation of Gaza, provided that Israel could show some progress on the political process with Palestinians and make room for Palestinians in self-rule in Gaza.

Now, the last thing on most Israelis' minds right now is the political process with Palestinians in Judea and Samaria and most Israelis are thinking about completing the immediate war aims and Prime Minister Netanyahu published a piece in the Wall Street Journal, last week, I guess, in which he said we have three aims now. Before we can talk about the day after in the Gaza Strip, we've got to destroy Hamas, we have to demilitarize the entire Strip, and we have to de-radicalize it. Okay. Is there some way to bring together those goals with Saudi Arabia's willingness to substantially fund rehabilitation? I think, as we all know, Benjamin Netanyahu is a very talented politician. There would be a way to define the political process, for example, the way he did in 2009 when he said, we would support a Palestinian state, but it's got to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, and it's got to be demilitarized. There would be a way to define Israel's commitment to freedom and prosperity for the Palestinians in a way, I believe, that would meet Saudi demands and allow Saudi Arabia and Emirates to be involved in what will one day be on the agenda, the renovation of the Gaza Strip, where after all, more than 2 million Palestinians live.

Out of the Abraham Accords yet or out of the momentum that the Abraham Accords created, yet, I think there are opportunities. I'll make one other point in this connection, Bill, that actually Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, have been relatively restrained. Israel is engaged in unprecedented war with Hamas. It's lasted much longer than any of the previous operations. There has been criticism, but my guess, informed by numerous conversations, is that Egypt, Sisi, Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Jordan, are rooting for Israel to succeed in destroying the jihadist Hamas. Once that happens, they'll also want to see reasonable arrangements developed for the more than 2 million Palestinians who live in the Gaza Strip and they'll want to work with Israel to do it.

BILL KRISTOL:

What strikes me, listening to you here is very interesting, is the range of things, the possibilities that we could see in the short term. Obviously long-term, who knows, and we'll talk about that a bit, maybe, about Israel itself as a country and so forth, but just in the next

three months, six months, 12 months, I mean, there's a range of scenarios from nightmarish, multi-front war with major exchanges in terms of weapons and deaths and possibly involving Iran and possibly involving the US. Obviously, look what's happening even now with the US Navy and the Houthis and so forth and just kind of genuine Middle East war and then who knows what would happen on the West Bank in those circumstances in terms of people being incited or deciding to cause much more trouble than has happened there so far, I think. Sort of nightmarish scenarios in terms of, not just instability, but genuine war, big war, all the way to maybe it's a moment where on the one hand the society is showing strength in Israel, terrible deaths, obviously both in Israel and in Gaza, but Arab governments being restrained, maybe a chance to even begin to work things out, so to speak. Maybe from a domestic point of view, depending on one's views, people will have different preferences, but some reconciliation of the polarization, at least temporarily. You do have a semi-unity government now with guns and so forth.

So, I guess I'm just struck, much more, I think, than is normally the case, how, I don't know, just sort of the range of scenarios of possibilities that one is looking at. Does that strike you and does it strike people there?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yes. Forgive me now for slipping into cliché, but in the old days, travel in Israel, everybody knows everything. It can be charming once you get used to it. On the cab ride in from the airport on this most recent trip, I was asking about what's to be expected. The cab driver said to me, "Listen. Anybody who tells you with confidence what's going to happen tomorrow, is criminally insane in this country and should be locked up." Yes, Israelis share your sense of great uncertainty and it's important for us to remind ourselves that some of the options are options that could improve stability in the region. It's not all bleak. We are though, once again in a situation which we should remember... Who was it who told us to hope for the best and prepare for the worst? That is a good place to be when we're thinking about Israel. Preparations should be and are underway for various worst case scenarios, but there is a real opportunity to work more closely with the moderate Arab Gulf powers and maybe Egypt. We'll see.

BILL KRISTOL:

I suppose coming back to where we began and maybe closing with this, the range of uncertainty can be, I think, if one thinks about other countries [inaudible] history, can be a force for moderation— for, okay look, we're looking at an unbelievably dangerous and uncertain situation out there. We can't be indulging in every fight we'd like to have about the status of the Rabbinate in terms of religion or about judicial overall or about personalities and Netanyahu and so forth, on the one hand or the uncertainties can, I think, exacerbate the fights in some ways because it means there's more issues, more occasions on which to dispute everything, to have distrust about what the government's doing or distrust about the opposition or distrust about the secular people or the religious people a few miles away and so forth. I don't know. We all thought after 9/11, we did come together and there was quite a lot of polarization after Bush v Gore and so forth and Clinton's impeachment and we all thought, okay, we're coming back together and now we're much more polarized than we were 20 years ago. So I'm just curious how you think about that and what you take away from the trip.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

I have to add that as I was waiting for the flight to take off at Ben Gurion Airport, I guess late Monday night, I read in the newspapers that the Supreme Court had actually reached a decision in the first of the two big cases before it: the deal with the so-called Judicial Overhaul in which it ruled, it invalidated the only part of the judicial overhaul that the government had

managed to pass. Then the following day it ruled a second time against the government saying that Netanyahu government could not implement during the period of this government, the law that would've shielded the Prime Minister from being stripped of his powers by a combination of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General. These two decisions by the Supreme Court are throwing fuel on the fire and they're making it more, not less likely, that the streets are going to fill up again. I myself would've advised the Supreme Court to find procedural grounds for sending the legislation back to the Knesset and say, you need to do it over because you didn't properly comply with all the requirements for passing basic law. Never mind.

The bottom line is this. The opportunities, Bill, that you were sketching are there in Israel, but it would require deft leadership to take advantage of the unity that's been formed in the fight against Hamas and to temper the still raging, just beneath the surface, grievances and bitterness that divides the government from the opposition.

BILL KRISTOL:

And this echoes a question in the US for how much of it is it about Trump and how much of it is it about real cultural and social and political, real differences in vision about what the country should be and should stand for and so forth. And I guess I'd ask the same thing. Netanyahu has become such... I mean he's been there for so long in power, right? I mean, he first was Prime Minister in 1996, right? In and out of power. And has become such a polarizing figure and maybe personally is actually more polarizing than he once was and so forth.

How much of this can we say you get a government led by Benny Gantz or something and it's got 75 seats in the Knesset, and things start to change in a non-polarizing direction. And how much of it is that the strains are deeper, the fissures, the divisions in the country on cultural, sociological, political grounds really are about the character of the country, the relationship of being a Jewish nation and a democratic and liberal nation. Things you've written a lot about. I'm just curious. I mean obviously it's some of both, but what do you think about that?

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yes. First, I agree it's some of both. The fissures are deep. However, the polls have been pretty clear about this since late spring. Were elections to be held, a coalition led by Gantz would be able to form a pretty stable, large government. I think this has only increased since the war. What this tells us is Israel is dominated... sorry, dominate is the wrong word. Israel still is home to a large, Zionist, mildly center-right majority. That large Zionist leaning center-right majority is not reflected in the government right now. Netanyahu, who was a lightning rod before this government intensified the fury directed at him by joining forces with two extreme elements in Israeli politics, the ultra-Orthodox and the, I think it's fair to call them the religious ultra-nationalists led by Minister of Treasury Smotrich and Minister of National Defense Itamar Ben Gvir.

And because Netanyahu has formed, even though it's a majority in the Knesset, it's 64 out of 120 seats, it reflects a sensibility, or at least it gives concessions to this extreme elements which are dramatically out of step with the actual majority in the country. So Smotrich and Ben Gvir part of the coalition prevents Netanyahu making, I believe prevents him taking the kinds of measures that he ought to take consistent with Israeli security towards the Palestinians. And the Netanyahu government has been heaping huge amounts of cash on the ultra-Orthodox in ways that actually intensify their positions as a community apart, those policies have deepened the fissures and irony of ironies, this is inconsistent with Benjamin Netanyahu's own vision of Zionism is laid out in his 2022 book, *Bibi: My Story*, where his Zionism is a tough minded Zionism, which is built around creating a strong economy which will fund a strong military which will back successful diplomacy.

But he's been unable to do that because of this particular coalition. I suppose we don't have time to go into why he was driven to form such a coalition. But here again, as with the military situation, there are... bleak conclusions are possible, but along with the bleak conclusions is cause for hope. And that in as much as poll after poll suggests that the majority of Israelis want a Zionism that is simultaneously supports a Jewish state, a democratic state, and a state that protects individual rights. Doing that is hard work, or I should say is the hard work of politics. But those three notions, which by the way are deeply inscribed in the Israeli Declaration of Independence — and my own view is that ought to be something Israeli conservatives put a premium on conserving — is right there and I think reflected again in this majority that is not at the moment reflected in the Knesset.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. And I've been struck how much just the money they're sending to some of the ultra-Orthodox communities has infuriated people who are not on the left that much, center-right Israelis who just were fighting a war, as you said earlier, there's massive internal displacement, massive shortages in businesses and so forth, and we're sending even more money. I mean, whatever the merits of, I mean it's just because these people are in the government and they're demanding it, right? I mean, there's not a serious analysis of why they need X amount of funds.

So I suppose the conclusion I draw from this is, I mean, presumably there won't be a change for government in the next weeks or few months as long as the war goes, at some point there would have to be a, well, maybe it wouldn't have to be, but for now at least it seems like that's the case. And if that's the case, the developments over the next few months will be military and foreign policy ones, as it were, more than domestic. And I suppose that's what we should all follow. I guess we'll just close with that. Well, what should we be looking, I mean obviously we'll follow the news, but particular questions, particular inflection points, particular big things that would really change as we said, the range of possibilities that could be actualized over the next few weeks and months.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Israel already seems to be bringing back troops from the center of Gaza Strip and repositioning for what's going to be a long, drawn out campaign, but more surgical operations going into Gaza, coming back to secure positions right there on the border, that means more people are going home. In the near term, we need to keep our eyes on what are going to be the reactions in the streets to the two supreme court decisions. Now, they favor what is the effective majority on the streets in Israel. We'll see how the government responds. It would be best if both sides managed to put the judicial controversy to the side for right now as far as geopolitically, the question will become, and this has been much in the news just in the last week in Israel, whether the possibility of a regional Arab force entering Gaza could actually be realized because I say we have a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. This is a way misleading. We've had a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, for 20 years the place has been badly neglected.

By the way, this is on Hamas's shoulders. They have neglected the population in order to build terror tunnels and prepare for October 7th and prepare and to continue to fight until they accomplish their goal, which is the destruction of Israel. But what we should be looking at is the thinking about what sort of entity is going to be taking responsibility to care for Gaza's 2 million people. A lot is at stake there. I want to emphasize all available options are awful. They're all awful. And so a very ineffective form of criticism will be when someone puts forward a proposal simply to point out the ways in which it's awful. Children will be able to do that. The question will be, which of the various ideas is the least awful?

And once we can settle on that, we have to do what's in our power to support the least awful of the options for the renovation of Gaza. And I'm with Netanyahu on this that comes after the defeat of Hamas, after demilitarization, I would probably say along with de-radicalization,

just make this point. Here's something we can practically do, and this is United States business for sure. UNRWA Schools, United Nations Relief and Works Agency have... preside over schools in Gaza, also in Judea and Samaria that teach jihad to the students. When I say teach jihad, I mean teach hatred for Jews, teach hatred for America, teach hatred for the West, teach hatred for ordinary lives and call the students to lives of martyrdom, girls and women as well as boys and men. There is every reason as a chief funder of the United Nations for the United States to be involved in putting an end to this outrageous conduct by a UN organization.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's a good practical suggestion. I got to say, the UN generally, I'm sort of returning to my anti-UN roots since 20 years ago between watching the Russians in the Security Council as they're having invaded a neighbor and fighting again, an extremely brutal and bloody war, unjustified war, largest war in Europe in 80 years. Watching that happen and reading some of the stories about what UN agencies have been doing on the ground in Gaza and elsewhere, and their effectiveness in Lebanon, remind me why we're in the UN in general, but I guess that's a discussion.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

What do we provide? 20%, 25% of it's budget?

BILL KRISTOL:

I don't know. Yeah, probably. That's discussion for another day. And I suppose practically just the north, I guess, right? Keep an eye on the north because that could blow. I think we could be having a very different discussion 24 hours after that if that were to blow up.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yeah, no predictions there. It could blow. But I can also imagine a gradual return of the people who live in those regions, the people who've been evacuated from those regions with heightened IDF presence and with civilians taking responsibility for conducting 24/7 watches and manning posts in their cities. One can imagine that happening and one could imagine that border holding. In fact, we should remember it was Hamas's hope that Hezbollah would immediately enter the war. That was almost three months ago on October 7th. And even though there is low, I should be clear about this as well, there's been low intensity conflict since October 7th. Not a day goes by in which Hezbollah does not fire rockets or launch drones or fire a anti-tank projectile Israel's direction. And not a day doesn't go by in which Israel doesn't return fire. And as we know, more effectively. So low intensity conflict there is. It remains imaginable that the low intensity conflict will remain low intensity conflict, but the alternative remains imaginable as well.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess it's probably prudent to end on that note of uncertainty.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Yes, it is.

BILL KRISTOL:

But important educationally to be... obviously for all of us to be aware of the real uncertainties. And there's so much more we can discuss. We should discuss some other the time both the domestic situation in Israel, the whole question of Iran, which is a little more of a US policy, partly a US policy question, which you've written about and been involved in. But

let's do that discussion in a few months. And this has been really terrific, Peter. Thank you for doing this. It really has been for me, and I've followed this pretty closely, thought provoking and informative, and I think really giving me much more perspective on what's happening there. And so, thank you for coming back and despite being slightly jet lagged, I'm sure that you've shown no evidence of it. Very impressive. Thank you for doing this.

PETER BERKOWITZ:

Well, thank you for the questions and for the conversation.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.