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European Languages

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05.10.2024

Netanyahu's Dangerous Militarism



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“Israel, in sum, has recovered the military primacy it lost when Hamas fighters surged across the Gaza border on Oct. 7 and ravaged Israeli civilians.”

– David Ignatius, oped, Washington Post, October 2, 2024.

“We Absolutely Need to Escalate in Iran.”

– Bret Stephens, editorial, The New York Times, October 3, 2024.

The mainstream media has been largely critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s dangerous use of military power, and largely supportive of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s equally dangerous use of military power. The leading proponents of these contrasting views have been David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* and Bret Stephens in the *New York Times*.

Ignatius could not be more wrong about Israel recovering its military primacy. Israel never lost the primacy it established in the Six-Day War in 1967 in the rapid sequencing of defeating the military forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in that order. The surprise attacks of

the October War in 1973 and the Hamas attacks of October 2023 were essentially aberrations that could be attributed to intelligence and political failures on both occasions. Prime Minister Golda Meir lost her leadership because of her failures; Prime Minister Netanyahu will lose his whenever Israel gets around to holding another election.

The Middle East is facing its greatest peril at this juncture because Netanyahu now has a free hand to conduct any military operation he desires against Iran. Netanyahu no longer has to be concerned with the responses of Hamas and Hezbollah to an Israeli attack against Iran because both organizations have been strategically defeated on the battle field. Netanyahu no longer has to be concerned with U.S. calls for restraint because the Biden administration is tethered to the demands of an imminent presidential election and President Joe Biden has shown no interest in using the only leverage in his policy quiver—the withholding of military assistance. Netanyahu no longer has to be concerned with domestic opposition because it has vanished, and even former prime ministers such as Naftali Bennett are calling for Israel to destroy the network of pipelines, refineries, and oil terminals on Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf as well as the missile complex in Isfahan.

Stephens is the major U.S. cheerleader for Bennett’s proposed bombing campaign. He has invoked the need to defeat the “axis of evil” (Russia, China, and North Korea) before it provides technical help for Iran’s nuclear ambitions. According to Stephens, Biden—“at a minimum”—should destroy the Isfahan missile complex as a “direct and and proportionate response” to Iran’s aggressions. Carrying out such a threat, according to Stephens, could convince Iran to order Hezbollah and the Houthis to “stand down” and even “pressure Hamas to release its Israeli hostages.”

Stephens makes no mention of the Iran nuclear accord of 2015 that placed significant limitations on Iran’s nuclear ambitions, including its enrichment of uranium, construction of centrifuges, and production of weapons-grade plutonium. The agreement also prohibited research activities that contributed to designing and developing a nuclear device in perpetuity. If Iran is closer to development of nuclear weapons, it is due to Donald Trump’s decision in 2018 to abrogate a treaty that had significant international support, including from Russia and China. And if Iran has enough near-weapons grade nuclear fuel for several nuclear bombs, it is due to Trump and his national security adviser, John Bolton.

Stephens (and Netanyahu) wants the completion of the “decapitation” of Hezbollah and the “evisceration” of Hamas in Gaza. He has supported an Israeli invasion of Lebanon, but makes no mention of previous Israeli failures in Lebanon in 1978, 1982, and 2006, which led to unexpected losses and an unanticipated long-term occupation. U.S. efforts to pull Israeli

chestnuts out of the fire led to U.S. losses in 1983. Israel successfully forced the ouster of Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon, but in doing so a far more dangerous Hezbollah emerged, a group that didn't exist until Israel invaded the Lebanese capital of Beirut in 1982.

Greater use of Israeli military power has not provided Israel with greater security over the years, and there is no reason to believe that any retaliation—other than a symbolic response similar to the April attack—would end the current cycle of permanent occupation. Israeli analysts continue to speak of “escalate to deescalate,” “escalation dominance,” and “restoration of deterrence,” but Israel's “targeted assassinations,” the violence of settlers on the West Bank, and the genocidal campaign in Gaza will never serve any long-term strategic purpose. The collusion of the Israeli defense forces, the police, and the military courts speaks to the apartheid that exists on the West Bank. Until the United States understands the necessity of diplomatic dialogue with Iran, and Israel understands the the necessity of Palestinian sovereignty on a land that they can call their own, the cycle of permanent war will continue.

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OCTOBER 4, 2024