

Talking Geopolitics

Special Episode: Israel at War | George Friedman on Where the Conflict Goes from Here

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Podcast transcription

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Christian Smith:

The spiraling conflict between Hamas and Israel has shocked the world. The brutality of the attacks and the suffering caused to civilian life has reignited a conflict that many had forgotten. Hamas' attacks on a far superior power with no realistic chance of any kind of victory though has left many asking Why? What's the point of it all?

Well, on this special edition of Talking Geopolitics from Geopolitical Futures, we aim to find out and to do so I'm joined by GPF Chairman and founder George Friedman.

Now before we begin, I just want to say that you can find out more about anything that we're discussing if you go to geopoliticalfutures.com/forward-slash-podcast. But first question I really want to ask you now George is this: Why has Hamas attacked? What is the point of it all?

George Friedman:

Well, the first thing to remember is that in Hamas' point of view the war was not over. The Israelis had one perception of it. Not all the Arabs thought that the hostility with Israel was going on. But Hamas was a special organization. It tried to do this at this time, I suspect because the Middle East was solidifying into a single block.

The various players, Egyptians, the Saudis, so on, were working with Israel. And the, Hamas thought this was a terrible thing. It was breaking the block. And thought that an attack on Israel, that was as brutal as possible would break up this block and may well. But they saw the collaboration growing and he wanted to stop it.

Christian Smith:

You think Iran was directly involved in the decisions to begin this attack?

George Friedman:

Well, when you say directly involves, that's a tricky statement. I had no idea that Iran was playing with Hamas for one reason. One is Sunni, the other isn't. And that's a major dividing line between the two.

I'm still not convinced that Iran was involved. I think Iran is picking up the ball because it may as well be as it's going to be. And but somebody really helped them. The missiles that they were firing, the rockets, the amount of training that had to go into this had to happen somewhere. It wasn't just something to pick up in backyard and play. This was a very professional, very capable attack. So if it wasn't the, and I have no evidence that it was, it was somebody else who decided to build up an Arab army. And let it loose, and who it was, I don't know.

Christian Smith:

Well speaking of not knowing, I think let's look at the intelligence failure from the point of view of Israel. I mean, in many ways, this is like what happened with the Yom Kippur war in 1973. How it would explain to us what happened in that war with the intelligence failure.

George Friedman:

In intelligence there constantly data flowing in. The data congeals itself. What I call the concept. The concept in 1973 was that the Arabs would not attack except under certain special conditions. Similar thought was made here that there was no force large enough to engage the Israeli army and has to widespread think.

Now, when you're sitting there doing intelligence and you get contradictory points, you're human. The tendency is that the thing you believed is the truth of God. And you start dismissing things like, the idea that may be wrong. At the same time, was incomprehensible as this, we saw in Jordan a buildup of troops moving to the border. Israeli aircraft were certainly monitoring the situation. Israel has satellites that were watching very clearly.

Israel is a very powerful nation. It's a nuclear power. So what I think happened was that it was so deeply embedded, if not in intelligence then in the office of the prime minister that there is no way this is happening. That they demanded more intelligence, more intelligence until by the time it happened, there's nothing to do. This is not, this is not only an Israeli problem. This is the built-in problem of intelligence.

How do you abandon basic things you believe to be true, built up over a career? And certainly say, OK, is wrong. You'll cling to that idea. And that's what makes that a dangerous way to run a government. You've got to remember these are human beings. And I think that was the mistake that they did. And it

was the same mistake they made, if we call the mistake, in 73. They did not. The concept said there was not going to be an attack.

And even though Mossad human intelligence was bringing in reports that they're preparing for one. In this case, the prime minister simply could not fathom that this was the case.

Christian Smith:

What you're saying they actually, it also reminds me quite a lot of what happened with the German invasion of the Soviet Union and in 1941 when Stalin refused for days after began that it was actually going on because it was what he believed that that was never going to take place or at least not at that time.

It's a trend you can obviously see around the world.

George Friedman:

Well, you see it everywhere. Of Germany and Russia was more complex. Which is the Germans said about a disinformation campaign. And it was very effective. Doesn't seem that in 73 the Arabs had a disinformation campaign. Maybe that's what was going on here. They were doing headaches over an extended period of time.

And the problem of intelligence has got to be secret. And the people who are overseeing it or members of intelligence. No, it is impossible for me to believe that this force was put together. Armed, positioned. Sent out to go down to Gaza without some pretty sophisticated dealings going on. We will, as in 73, never truly find out where.

Christian Smith:

What happens now then? Now that, you know, as of recording now it's Tuesday, it's Tuesday lunchtime in the US. It's Tuesday evening in Europe. And later on the evening in Israel. What happens now? Israel's taken back control of Gaza, of the of the area around Gaza rather. What do they do now?

George Friedman:

They have hostages. And if they conduct an assault on top of everything else. Which the hostages get killed. That's gonna be internally bad politics. It'll also increase the doubt that these are ready to know what they're doing. And it seems to me that Hamas is taking advantage of that. Put them in a position where they're defending. Amass troops. Okay, now there are many plans being hatched by Israeli Special Forces. And how to take this. All of them contain serious threats. They have to be executed perfectly.

So what I think is happening is that these Israelis are talking to Arab countries with some influence over Hamas. And really asking them to save this. They don't want to save it because they know soon as the hostage is safe. The wrath of God is going to fall on everybody involved. This is even keeping them going.

Christian Smith:

Well, it's an interesting point there because as you mentioned earlier, there have been normalizing relations between Israel and some other Middle Eastern relations between Israel and some other Middle Eastern nations for the first time in Israel and some other Middle Eastern nations for the first time in recent years.

Donald Trump's Abraham Accords had something to do with part of that in particular more recently part of the Biden administration's main goals in the Middle East was to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. And in many ways, as you suggested, that may have driven this desperation to take action against Israel by Hamas, is there a risk?

Then that their plan for Israel that they plan may succeed that they may crack down so heavily on those in Gaza and on Hamas that that Saudi Arabian and other similar nations are effectively shamed into stopping this normalization.

George Friedman:

That seems to be the intent. That the Israelis ultimately, their ideal would be let them kill their own citizens. In vengeance and then let them. Rage throughout the Middle East. Taking out governments people and so on. And so alienate the Israelis from the Arab world. That all of these ideas, they're very real. They were going to happen, can't be done. That the Arab governments cannot do it in the face of civility.

Christian Smith:

Do you think - I mean the Israeli rhetoric has been very strong. It's called it Pearl Harbor and 9 11 rolled into one. Do you think that there's a risk that that might happen?

George Friedman:

Well, these really rhetoric had better be strong. Because they're speaking to the Israeli people. These really people now like people everywhere, anywhere, are looking to their government to be decisive. To be courageous and to be infallible. They have lost infallible. We were working on the other 2.

So we're in a situation where is it sort of, the tie is that, the Hamas forces can't be easily attacked. In the, tie is that Hamas can't seem to do anything more than it's done. What I suspect Israel will do if not, you know, attack directly or if they can't get any Arab help, is massive attacks throughout the Arab world, including governments that they feel were participating in this. If you remember one thing though I'm

not sure that they intended to capture Israelis. It happened that they were coming down or out. Happen to have Israelis. I'm not sure that intelligence is that clear that it were and they decided to take long.

Now they can't let them go. They're critical to them. And the real problem that emerges here is that Israel is left in a position where they've got a bunch of hostages being held, Israelis. No cooperation coming from the world and they're going to take a large-scale military operation as punishment because they're frustrated and can't do anything else.

There are people in the Arab world who are very sophisticated, understand the Israelis and know the position they are in. Do they have any influence over Hamas? That's going to be the question.

Christian Smith:

Well, let's speak about the US for a moment here a couple of weeks ago, Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, said that the Middle East never been so peaceful. That often probably words maybe not to say because it'll blow up on your face like this. I mean the US itself is going to have a lot of involvement and this. How are they looking at the situation?

George Friedman:

The US is not planning one thing: Involvement is a military operations. Israel is quite capable of carrying it out itself. And we don't want to be responsible anyway. And it was a few weeks ago. I, I believe that it was moving in a direction. I didn't believe that Hamas was still a functional entity. Hamas, it was something from 20 years ago. They occasionally said something or did something.

But the idea that Hamas was training in the desert somewhere. I'm planning an assault like this. Is really, I was taken back by it. It was not something that I believed was anywhere on the table.

But some Arab governments had to know. They obtained rockets. These Israelis should have known that they have rockets. The Arabs should have known it. So. This is not just a concept here. They were blinded. They simply could not. Imagine that Hamas was still operational to the point. Of being able to mount this kind of attack.

Christian Smith:

We seem to now be a long way from where we were in the nineties with the Oslo Accords and the proceeding towards a two-state solution. You seem to be a long way from where we were in 1947 when Israel was first established.

What's the future now for this? Is, this attack, might it actually bring about some change in the long term or are we actually now even further away from that than we were before?

George Friedman:

Well, we can't be further away from it because all those other fantasies were not real, they were just that. But now the Arab governments have something to consider. Because if Hamas continues operating, continues to be running free, those countries are going to be hit. They're gonna be hit because we can't quite find Hamas. They've dispersed. And because the Israeli public demands some action to be taken. And that's the really, hope. That's the incentive for the Arabs to kind of turn over Hamas.

But here is the thing. Israel has excellent intelligence about Arab countries. The United States has excellent intelligence about countries. How did they hide the presence among them, of this group? Did a group outside of the Middle East help them? How do you do that? Why would you do that? Russia, China, none of them benefit from this.

Okay, so. You look at it and you're really puzzled and the biggest puzzle was not a Israeli intelligence failure. We know that the Arabs, some Arabs have to know this is going on. Why didn't they stop it? That's the question.

Christian Smith:

Well, George, final question. I mean, from what you're saying, what's going on here, in many ways creates more questions for neighboring Arab countries than anyone else. Is there a risk that this conflict will expand into a more regional war with more players. Where does it go in that sense?

George Friedman:

Well, there's always risk. But the fact is that the Muslim countries have gone through a period of peace have made money. Trade relations and it emerged as significant players in many cases, Saudi Arabia. You know, in the world. On the other hand, the governments have always been terrified of the radicals. Of the people who got any length to fight the war with Israel. They're afraid that Hamas or its followers will strike. On the other hand, they're terrified that the Israelis will strike if they don't carry this out, simply by about having another target. Yeah, they're gonna hit them.

So they have a really intense interest in getting this under control. I think they probably can if they take the risks. And if they don't get it in control, there's no risk. They're gonna get hammered.

So what we're seeing in the past few days, I think is the Israelis and the Americans. British whatever, reaching out to their contacts and say This is not a joke. This is not one of those things that will pass away. It can end with you cooperating with us. Get in with you being seen as an enemy. I think that's why we've seen the quiet this far. And they may have another couple of days to play that game, but not much more.

Christian Smith:

George Freidman, thank you very much for your time on this episode of Talking Geopolitics. And as I said at the beginning, you can find out more and read more of George's and geopolitical futures writing if you go to [geopolitical futures dot com forward slash podcast](http://geopoliticalfutures.com). Thanks very much for listening and we look forward to seeing you next time.