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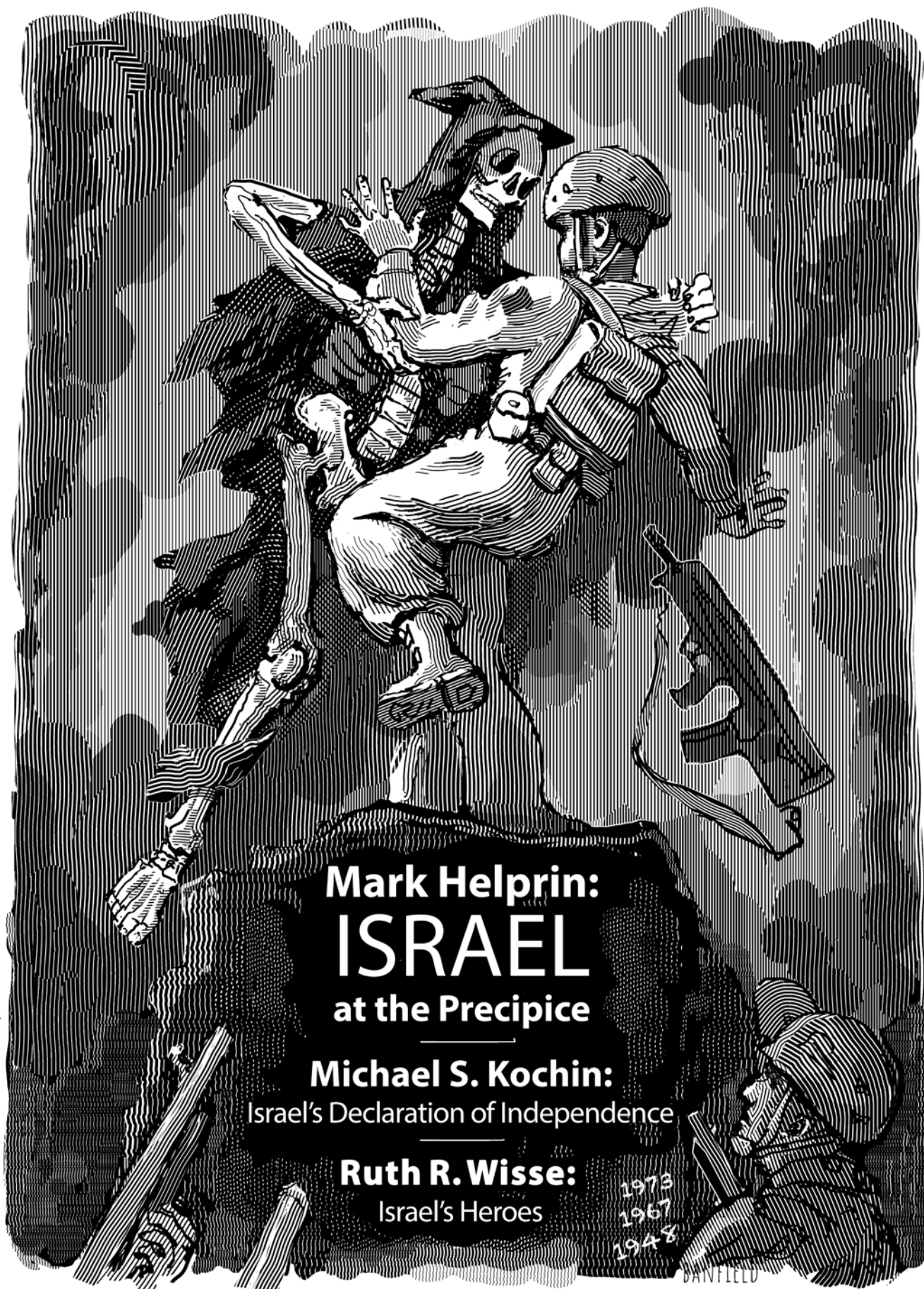
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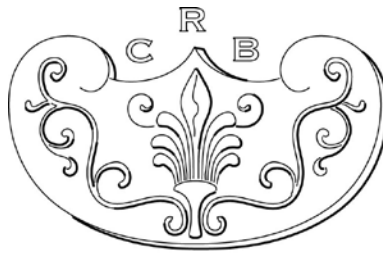
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Essay by Mark Helprin

ISRAEL AT THE PRECIPICE ONCE AGAIN

What it can, should, and may yet do.

AS I WRITE IN LATE OCTOBER AND the first days of November, Israel is yet again in a war for survival, which should not be surprising given that the objective of its enemies is its extermination. This early on, the war is paradoxically in static flux. That is, although the battle space in Gaza is subject to intense preparation as Israel degrades Hamas defenses and logistics, a full ground campaign has yet to begin, although as you read it may have begun and ended. At present, lines have been established to cut Gaza in two, the plan being, apparently, to work slowly and methodically, as if Israel has all the time in the world, which because of international pressure, it does not. Optimally, however, a full campaign should not begin “now,” and this is why.

In May of this year, the president of Iran met with senior members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and said, “We consider the collapse of the Zionist regime [and, as he stated later, “the end of Israel”] to be very close.” Though Israel’s enemies routinely call for its destruction, a confident prediction of the timeline is unusual and cannot have failed to impress experienced observers—in fact, to have stopped them short. But as

his remarks fit nicely with the progress and purpose of Iran’s increasingly rapid nuclear strides, it is doubtful that all but a few analysts associated them with a more complex and hidden strategy.

To wit, that strategy, much simplified: Hamas prepares for and executes the ISIS-style attack of October 7. The sheer, Holocaust-reminiscent barbarity galvanizes Israel, which, spurred by emotion and necessity, decides upon the destruction of Hamas at whatever cost. If Israel bogs down in fighting through the dense urban rubble of Gaza—or even if it doesn’t, but has dangerously concentrated its resources on the southern front—Iran instructs Hezbollah to fire its more than 100,000 missiles at Israel’s cities, its closely concentrated critical infrastructure, and its military targets (Hamas has done this routinely, but its missiles are much less capable), and to let loose its formidable armed forces upon Israel’s north. Simultaneously, Iran launches hundreds of ballistic missiles at the same exposed and essential concentrations. A combination of Hezbollah, Syrian, and Iranian forces resident on the Golan front mounts an attack from the northeast. A carefully prepared rising on the

West Bank occurs in conjunction with parallel operations (such as in the July 2021 trial run) by Israeli Arabs within Israel itself. If Israel appears to be tottering, the Arab street may force now coldly friendly, apparently neutral, or merely gun-shy Arab states to join in the frenzy, much as they did in 1948, 1967, and 1973.

Of course, this scenario takes no account either of how Israel can respond with its conventional forces, or of its nuclear arsenal. First, although it is hard to believe that Israel has not been aware of the trap described in the previous paragraph, it would hardly be surprising were it, instead of preempting with the strategic *éclat* of the Six Day War or the 1976 Entebbe hostage rescue, simply to count on its resilience. Or on its ability to respond defensively even if without the initiative and according to the timetable of its enemies. Nor would it be surprising if it overestimated what it can do, and underestimated its opponents, as in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and so painfully of late. Second, faced with the Iranian theocracy’s affection for end-times martyrdom, Israel’s nuclear weapons, although immensely potent in effect, are far less powerful as a deterrent.



To consider, depending on when you are reading, what Israel may, should, or can have done—or may yet, should, and can do—it is necessary unemotionally and objectively to rank the threats it faces, so that it might go after them in advantageous order, seizing rather than responding to the initiative. In terms of ascending threat, they are Gaza, Hezbollah, and Iran, although whom to strike first is not Iran but Hezbollah, the gravest threat until Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, which—absent a fraught Israeli or unlikely U.S. bombing campaign—it soon will. Perhaps more succinctly in regard to the rank order of threats, why talk to the monkey when the organ grinder is in the room?

Gaza

GAZA IS NOT NOW, NOR HAS IT EVER been, an existential threat to Israel. (Though overused, the word “existential” is here perfectly appropriate.) That Hamas’s unprecedented attack succeeded was easily avoidable and the result of Israel once again letting down its guard. More than half a century ago when I lived on various kibbutzim and served in the Israeli army and Air Force, settlements near hostile, infiltration-prone borders would likely have had an illuminated, doubly fenced, guarded perimeter, with watchtowers, searchlights, and war dogs racing in the spaces between the parallel, barbed-wire lines.

In contrast, consider the successfully but barely defended Kibbutz Mefalsim, less than a mile from Gaza. Its squad of 20 defenders, almost all of whom had to be roused from their beds, was able by the grace of God to fight off the terrorists (not “militants,” as in the Salvation Army). Almost beyond belief to veterans of a different era, Mefalsim had no such thing: no parallel fencing, no dogs, no watchtowers, no searchlights, and no deployed guard (suited to its 2.5-mile perimeter) of at least 20 at night and half that number by day, a force that could easily have been drawn from its population of 1,000.

Almost every kibbutz hosts foreign volunteers, and many employ Arab workers, some even from Gaza, which means that each is thoroughly mapped and its vulnerabilities charted. Fifty years ago at least, the *Shin Bet* (*Sherut haBitahon haKlali*, Israel’s internal security service) kept a close watch on outside workers, and vigorously harvested spies. Allowing Gazans into unprotected kibbutzim near the Gazan border was quite obviously not the brightest of ideas.

Had the kibbutzim been defended as of old, the massacres almost certainly would not have occurred, at least not at such a catastrophic

scale. Several Israeli military bases, too, were similarly ill-defended. Why? The answer has universal application and illuminates American failings as well. For the sake of efficiency and ease, advanced countries tend more and more to delegate tasks and responsibilities formerly accomplished and assumed by individuals, families, and civil society both to larger organizations and to technology and/or technique. A good example of this is over-reliance on predictive algorithms rather than on more costly and inconvenient granular inspections, such as in all forms of access control. Another is the trend of removing the right and means of self-defense from individuals and reserving them for the police. In Israel, because this was less troublesome and less costly, kibbutzim cheek-by-jowl with perhaps the world’s most active terrorist sanctuary abandoned their traditional defenses and off-loaded the preservation of their lives to the army.

But the pattern repeated itself in the army, which abandoned much of its former, manpower-intensive, and demanding physical presence, and off-loaded essential tasks to technology (electronic sensors, various barriers) and technique (intelligence analysis and collection; and, presumably, predictive algorithms). Not that technology and technique should not have been in play to the maximum—one approach need not exclude another—but, rather, that they should have existed synergistically with traditional, time-tested and (in the short but not the long term) more expensive practices. The whole of the Western world suffers from this lack of probity and from the desire to do things on the cheap, and Israel is very much a part of the Western world.

As the threat from Gaza was not and is not existential, it can (or could have been) contained until Israel is (or was) ready to deal with it on Israel’s own terms. As well as the re-establishment of traditional defenses in Israel’s exposed areas (which means almost everywhere), as described above and perhaps then some, the army, even if it doesn’t seize a new and wider buffer zone a quarter of a mile into Gaza, need only resort to effective and hardly mysterious standard practices.

The Gazan border with Israel is 32 miles long. To supplement fences, sensors, and perhaps minefields, if an infantry squad of five in a heavily armed IFV (infantry fighting vehicle, such as the Bradley) were deployed at every half mile, the farthest breach in the line at any point could be covered (assuming an average speed of 30 miles per hour) in 30 seconds by two IFVs and ten troops. Compare this to what happened on October 7, when Hamas terrorists had free rein, and donkey carts moved leisurely through openings in the barrier.

Such a deployment would require the continuous presence of 320 troops in each of three eight-hour shifts, or 960 total. Allowing for leave, illness, and three units of four-platoon reserves, this amounts to roughly 2,000 soldiers. Thus, all told, a brigade, little more than 1% of Israel’s standing forces but a far lesser percentage when accounting for the normal rotational presence of its much larger reserves. This tiny fraction and the Iron Dome missile defense system could and can adequately contain Gaza, and in conjunction with local self-defense would have made the events of October 7 impossible.

What to do about Gaza, whenever it might be done, is vexing and tragic. A protracted ground assault will result in a high number of Israeli military and Gazan civilian casualties, which, other than Hamas and its supporters, no one wants. Fighting on the surface is one thing, but the reportedly 310 miles of tunnels in which 20,000 Hamas terrorists can shelter are another. This is why Hamas took hostages: to present Israel with a “Sophie’s Choice.” Were there no hostages in the tunnels, the entrances and exits could be sealed with explosives delivered from the air or placed by ground troops. Israeli forces at a few carefully controlled exits might allow (or not) the surrender of those terrorists who chose not to expire within. But the presence of its own innocents presents Israel with an impossible dilemma—hostage deaths, or a greater number of infantry deaths—that nonetheless is unavoidable. Barring a miracle, it will be one or the other, or perhaps both.

In the aftermath of whatever is fated to occur, either Gaza will continue to fester or it will be possible to institute new governance. Many schemes for the latter have been suggested: international, Arab League, Gulf States, even a return to Israeli military occupation. All present great problems. Israel is not powerful enough—and the world’s expectations and tolerances have changed since the end of World War II—to impose an enduring, peaceful settlement as in the case of Japan and Germany. As Winston Churchill used to say in the darkest days of wartime, one has to keep buggering on, which is what Israel has been doing since even before its beginning. Its objectives have by necessity always been different from those of the great powers in this or other eras, for it understands that its chief war aim is survival, that by necessity this may persist as far as the eye can see and as one generation fades into another, and that mere survival may have to be, as is sung at the Passover, *dayenu*. That is, *enough for us*.

Which does not mean that Hamas need not be (or need not have been) destroyed, but rather that this should not be (or have been) the first



priority. Because Gaza may be the bait in a trap set by Iran, and because Gaza cannot be an existential threat such as Iran and Hezbollah, in the proper order of things, Gaza can wait.

Hezbollah

THIS HOSTILE, UNCEASINGLY DECLARATIVE, genocidal army of (depending upon which training levels are counted) anywhere from 30,000 to 50,000 soldier-terrorists is pressed against Israel's northern borders—in carefully prepared tunnels, bunkers, launch sites, and “civilian” villages among minefields and pre-sighted firing positions. Many of its units were hardened as they fought in Syria. These are well trained, well disciplined, and possessed not only of at least 20 varieties of anti-tank weapons in overabundance but of highly innovative tactics in employing them. Painfully aware of this since the war of 2006, Israel has developed highly technological counters, but they have yet to be fully tested in combat.

Other than to dominate Lebanon and if the opportunity arises invade the Galilee, Hezbollah's army exists to protect its arsenal of 100,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles spread across at least 15 classes. Those of shorter range—mainly unguided, with warheads up to 44 pounds—number in the tens of thousands and en masse are capable of carving a belt of up to 20 miles into Israel's north, about the maximum limit of maneuver for Hezbollah's ground forces should they put the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) on its back foot.

The real threats, however, are the heavier rockets and guided missiles in the hundreds and perhaps thousands, which, variously ranged, can reach any target in Israel, with warheads often exceeding 1,000 pounds. Although “the bomber” (in this case the missile) will not “always get through,” no matter how many Iron Dome and other anti-missile-system intercepts Israel achieves, a massive barrage will hit oil refineries, electrical generation stations, chemical plants, military bases, and city centers. Israel's small size—almost exactly that of New Jersey—precludes the luxury of dispersal or decent strategic depth, and this plus its high levels of development render it permanently both target rich and exposed.

Were a Hezbollah all-out assault supplemented by Iranian ballistic missiles, Shahed UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), and ground-launched cruise missiles, the effects and consequences would be devastating. In an unrestrained missile war coupled with a long-prepared and armed West Bank rising

and Israeli-Arab actions as in 2021, as well as whatever Hamas, Syria, and “volunteers” from Turkey, Iraq, et al., might offer up, Israel would be fighting asymmetrically on many fronts in the air, on land, on the sea, and from within.

Iran has built the threat of Hezbollah not merely in view of its hoped-for final solution but to dissuade Israel from dealing with an incipient Iranian nuclear breakout. Because it is essential and truly existential that Israel free itself from the nuclear threat, it must therefore free itself from dissuasion. In their attacks across Israel's borders, as well as their monotonous promises of destruction, Hezbollah and Hamas have day after day provided an undeniable and ready-to-go *casus belli*. *Casus belli* or not, though often cited as a propaganda weapon, the niceties of international law according to their own terms and definitions do not apply to non-state terrorist groups that, to understate severely, do not abide by them.

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In view of Israel's survival, the destruction of Hezbollah, or at least of its military capacity, is well deserved and long overdue.

Iran

IRAN HAS IMPRECISELY STATED THAT IF Israel attacks Hezbollah (presumably even just an Israeli response—at an unspecified level—to ongoing Hezbollah cross-border firing), Iran will launch a missile assault upon Haifa (and presumably the rest of the country). Haifa's unusual vulnerability to Hezbollah's missiles is attributable to its oil refinery, port, communication links, tank farms close to residential areas, petrochemical plants, and urban core upon the north-facing flank of Mount Carmel with nothing but air between it and Lebanon.

Iran's minimum of 3,000 ballistic missiles and land-attack cruise missiles of at least 26 types include 15 varieties capable of reaching Israel, with warheads from 1,650 to 2,200 pounds. Hardly bashful about utiliz-

ing parts of this arsenal to strike, as it has, Saudi Arabia and American military bases in the Middle East, Iran will be presumably even less reluctant in regard to Israel, which it views with the same dehumanizing bile as Hitler did the Jews of Europe. Though Israel's missile defenses can degrade a missile barrage, they cannot prevent catastrophic damage.

In light of the Obama and Biden Administrations' slavish and inexplicable appeasement of and aid to Iran, the relatively weak military deployments by the United States for the stated purpose of deterring Iran from action against Israel will not necessarily succeed. At one time, the Mediterranean was an “American lake,” with two carrier groups almost always present, a giant airbase in Libya, and a necklace of air and naval bases—north, south, and on islands—from Incirlik in Turkey to Rota in Spain. More recently, American naval presence has sometimes been limited to one unarmed command ship. And the Obama Administration achieved the extraordinary feat of reintroducing Russia to the Middle East, in strength, after American policy had kept it booted out for 40 years. Nonetheless, even now the United States is entirely capable of relieving Iran of its nuclear infrastructure and a good part of its missilery, as it should have long ago. Whether it will or will not is an open and highly contentious question, and it is unfortunately reasonable to assume that the largely unreasonable Iranian government will conclude after decades of American propitiation that America won't—even if it will.

Israel, however, if it can, must—though tactically, for the sake of surprise, it might strike Hezbollah first. My longstanding and best estimate is that Israel can by force eliminate the Iranian nuclear threat, but that in doing so it would have to devote so much of its airpower as to risk its survival should the mission fail. To counter the oft-repeated objection that Iran would simply restart its efforts, it is useful to note that the Iranians have taken 40 years to get this close to nuclear breakout, and starting over would hardly be easy. In regard to the objection that Pakistan, North Korea, or even Russia might salve Tehran's wounds with the gift of nukes, this would not necessarily leave Israel any worse off than if it failed to go after the Iranian homegrown variety, and here it is useful to note that in the nuclear age no state has yet to make such a documented transfer.

Hitting Iran's nuclear infrastructure first (and as much of its missilery as possible) would demoralize its allies perhaps to the point that Hezbollah would draw in its horns for fear of operating with a decisively

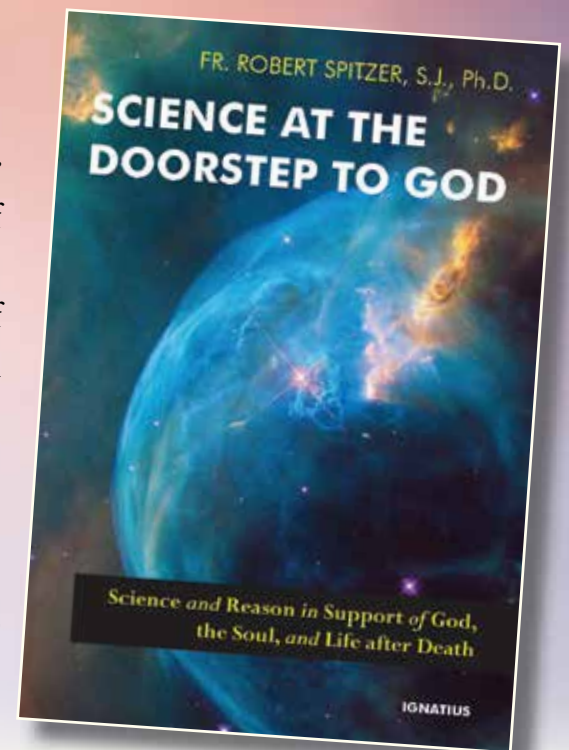
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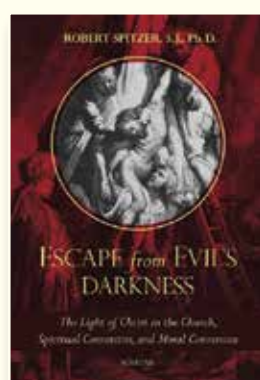
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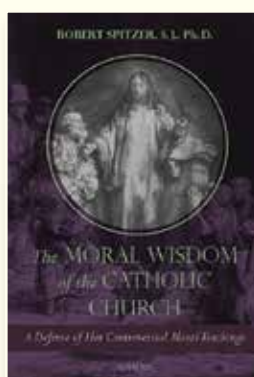
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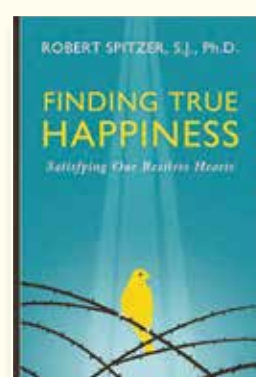
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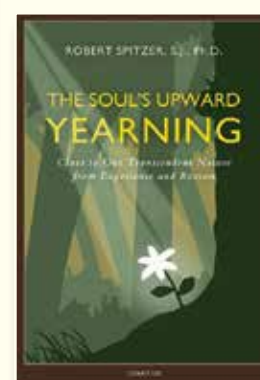
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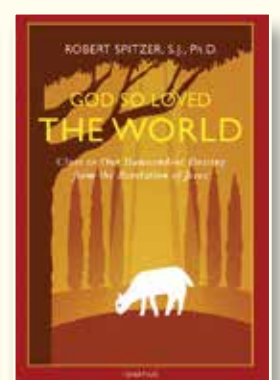
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weakened patron. Or perhaps not, in which case Israel would have sacrificed those benefits of surprise achievable by striking Hezbollah first. The choice will remain open as long as Iran has no deployable nuclear weapons, and what to choose would have to be decided in light of fine distinctions based upon the best available assessment of capabilities, the regional and international dimensions, and a generous helping of gambler's intuition.

There Is a Limit

NOW IT SEEMS THAT ISRAEL HAS taken the bait and will concentrate upon Hamas, leaving its two far greater threats unaddressed and thus ceding to them the initiative, which perforce they are more likely to exploit if they perceive that Israel is tied down in Gaza, taking casualties, and—unjustly but most certainly—losing ground internationally.

Also, Israel's reserve structure, though much changed since 1967 when mobilization brought the country to a halt, means that the almost total military call-up cannot but cripple the economy. It appears that this spur to move has dovetailed with the high heat of

public opinion in Israel and, despite its daily diminution, whatever sympathy and license have been granted to Israel by world opinion. Israel knows, and foreign intelligence agencies know, the north-south proportions of its deployments. Without that knowledge, and assuming the accuracy of publicly conveyed suggestions that most forces are massed in the south, the probability is very strong that Gaza is the first and may be the only target.

But perhaps not. You may know as you read this. One way or another, bear in mind that the wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973 were wars of national survival. At this writing the gravity of steadily accumulating threats is such that the pattern seems to be repeating itself and that, without doubt, if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold the existential question will return soon enough.

This necessitates, although it may not produce, action more decisive and dangerous than Israel has embarked upon since it was forced into its three wars of survival. There is no question that the country's economic success and progress toward normalization, and its political disarray, have weakened its military and strategic ethos. But October's utter savagery—one thing of many that will not

leave my mind is that before Hamas executed her, it raped a child so cruelly that her pelvis was shattered—has refreshed memories of the Holocaust, and it is impossible to underestimate to what this may lead.

For things have now changed. In the 2006 Lebanon War, the slogan of the Israeli peace movement was *Yesh Gvul*—"There is a border," but also, "There is a limit." This was to urge Israel's restraint and retreat. But much as when, in response to the Syrian attack of 1973, Moshe Dayan said, "*Ha yom, ha Surim holchim lilmod shehakav bein Dimashk leTel-Aviv, gam holech bein Tel-Aviv leDimashk*" (freely translated, "Today, the Syrians are going to learn that the road between Damascus and Tel-Aviv also runs between Tel-Aviv and Damascus"), *Yesh Gvul* has taken on a new meaning. For in regard to its survival, in memory of the events of October 7, and to protect its people's very right to life, Israel is entirely justified in thinking, *Yes, there is a border, and Yes, there is a limit.*

Mark Helprin is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute and the author, most recently, of The Oceans and the Stars: A Sea Story, A War Story, A Love Story (Overlook Press).

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