

What Israelis don't want to hear about Iran and Hezbollah

Sunday 22 September 2024, by [GOLDBERG Ori](#), [KONRAD Edo](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2024).

For years, Israeli expert Ori Goldberg has tried to challenge commonly-held assumptions about the Islamic Republic and its allies. Will anyone listen?

A woman watches the speech of Secretary-general of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah at her home in Mishmar David, September 19, 2024. (Nati Shohat/Flash90)

For most Israelis, Iran is little more than a faceless, hostile entity — an enemy to be feared, sanctioned, and, if necessary, overthrown. Despite years of rising tensions and repeated threats from Tehran, the Israeli public's understanding of the Islamic Republic remains frustratingly simplistic.

Even after Iran [directly attacked](#) Israel with a missile barrage earlier this year, and then threatened retaliation for the [assassination](#) of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh on Iranian soil, Israeli discourse continues to ignore the [deeper complexities](#) driving the Islamic Republic's actions — informed by a media and political establishment that have done little to move beyond this black-and-white portrayal.

Yet there are a few Israeli voices trying to cut through the facile rhetoric. For years, Ori Goldberg, a leading academic expert who has studied modern Iran's political and religious landscape for two decades, was invited on Israeli panels, TV broadcasts, and newspapers to present his heterodox analyses on the country.



Ori Goldberg. (Courtesy)

But after October 7, when Goldberg began vocally criticizing what he would come to call a genocide in Gaza, as well as Israel's policies toward Hezbollah and Iran, the invitations stopped. "Producers have repeatedly invited me for a pre-interview where they ask all kinds of questions," Goldberg says,

“then they would take the answers back to their superiors — and I never hear back.”

Yet Goldberg isn't deterred by the shunning, which he calls a “sad reflection of the limits of the discourse in Israel.” Since being outcast locally, he has amassed a following on social media and his analysis has found an international audience, including on Al Jazeera, a channel banned in Israel, where he continues to push for a more nuanced understanding of Iran.

I spoke with Goldberg about what Israelis don't understand about the Islamic Republic, why Tehran hasn't yet struck back after Haniyeh's killing, what can bring about a de-escalation on the northern front with Lebanon, and whether Iran truly cares about the Palestinian cause.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Edo Konrad - What are the main things that Israelis, and much of the international community, misunderstand about Iran?

Ori Goldberg. - Israelis see the religiosity of the Islamic Republic as an indication of uncompromising extremism and fanaticism, and thus view the country as an entity that must have some grand plan for the destruction of Israel and the gradual takeover of the world. They see it as a kind of ISIS. The reality is fundamentally different, but this does not mean that Iran is liberal, open, and pluralistic. [Far from it.](#)

Can you explain a bit more?

Let's go straight for the big one: there is an assumption that Iran is emotionally, culturally, and intellectually invested in destroying Israel — including through building a decades-long plan that includes encircling Israel with a so-called “[ring of fire](#)” that will tighten at the right moment. My understanding is that this assumption is false — not because Iran is Israel's friend and wants it to flourish, but because the Islamic Republic simply doesn't work that way. The leadership does not have any such grand plan — not for destroying Israel, not for exporting its Islamic revolution, and not for taking over the Middle East.

What Iran *does* have is stable behavioral patterns that include trying to spread its influence across the region. But that influence is often, in their eyes, the complete opposite of the idea of vanquishing another state. Again, this is not because Israel isn't Iran's enemy, but this [annihilation idea] goes against the very essence of the regime.

A large wall mural near Kibbutz Galuyot in Tel Aviv, depicting U.S. president Joe Biden as a superhero defending Israel from Iran, April 15, 2024. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

Hasn't the Islamic Republic repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel? Is the idea of a “ring of fire” and an “axis of resistance” a false one?

First of all, the Iranians do not use the term “ring of fire.” Secondly, let's be clear about a few things when it comes to Israel's annihilation. There certainly is antisemitism among the Iranian leadership, and there certainly are people there who speak about destroying Israel. But in general, the Iranians talk about it almost always as a response to the possibility of an Israeli attack against it.

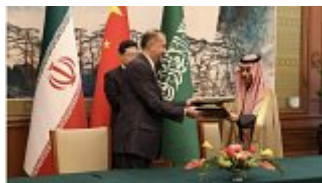
Yes, there is a [public clock](#) in Tehran that calculates the days remaining until Israel's predicted destruction by 2040. But this clock reflects something that is very characteristic of the Islamic Revolution — the belief in the power of history. The Iranians believe the following: Israel doesn't have the right to exist as it does, since it is the outcome of imperialism and Zionist land theft, and the Israeli regime will inevitably implode of its own accord. This is very reminiscent of Hezbollah

leader Hassan Nasrallah's famous ["spider web speech."](#)

This is one of our biggest blindspots in Israel. We cannot begin to view ourselves as aggressors; we only want peace, the common thinking goes here. But Israel attacks Iran — inside the country and outside of it — at a rate that far outweighs Iranian attacks on Israel. And then we tell ourselves that this is because they are bad guys and we are simply trying to defend ourselves? Which country has hundreds of nuclear bombs? Which country has the biggest and most powerful army in the region?

Can you say more about how Israel and Iran's existence in an Arab region informs the two countries' behavior?

This is very significant for both Israel and Iran's respective worldviews, as well as their geopolitical and strategic behavior. Both constantly ask themselves: how can they ensure their national security in the heart of a region that [they each believe] hates them?



Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud after signing a joint statement on the restoration of diplomatic relations, with Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang in the background. (Mehr News Agency/CC BY 4.0)

Iran and Israel have opposite approaches to this question. Israel believes in a tactical approach of isolating itself and acting with surgical strikes against threats. The Iranians believe that if they isolate themselves, they will allow all of their enemies to surround and attack them.

Thus, the Iranians are trying to build influence in every place where decision makers have the power to influence Iranian national security. They want to be present in Lebanon and Iraq and Yemen because they believe that being aware of what nearby states are planning is what will truly safeguard their national interests.

Israel is not interested in being part of the Middle East; even the Abraham Accords were a way to parlay its presence in the region. Israel wants to build walls, to be friendly with Europe and the United States. If someone threatens the state, Israeli war planes and soldiers will carry out a surgical attack and come back home to their bases.

You are saying that Israel acts surgically, but on its face, the signing of the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relations with Arab states appears much more like a strategic than a tactical move to create an alliance against Iran. In fact, it looks much more like what Iran does when it arms organizations like Hezbollah and the Houthis, in order to expand its influence in the region.

You're not entirely wrong. The Abraham Accords were certainly an attempt to expand some kind of regional Israeli presence. But the Accords have not been a wild success story. They were supposed to be the first phase on the road to [Israeli-Saudi normalization](#). I don't see this happening anytime soon, if at all, and I wouldn't be surprised if the leaders of the United Arab Emirates don't regret signing the deal.

Now it is true that Israel isn't completely isolated. But take a look at the country's behavior in the

last year, especially when it comes to [Jordan](#) and [Egypt](#), to see how much this kind of regional presence amounts to little more than tactical assistance rather than a strategic orientation. The same can be said about the Abraham Accords.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, U.S. President Donald Trump, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the UAE Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain attend the Abraham Accords Signing Ceremony at the White House in Washington, USA, September 15, 2020. (Avi Ohayon/GPO)

Let's be clear: the true motivation for signing the Abraham Accords was to remove the Palestinians from the regional agenda and completely normalize the occupation. But this theory has not proven itself. It was a short-term deal signed with the Trump administration, which did not exactly care about strategy in the Middle East, but about signing the "deal of the century."

Israel formulates its regional policies in response to what it perceives as threats of annihilation by uncompromising entities. In the past, those were Gamal Abdel Nasser and then Anwar Sadat in Egypt. Today it is Iran. According to this thinking, there is *always* going to be someone who wants to annihilate Israel. Look at how many people in Israel talk about the " Hamas genocide " of October 7. This is very easy for Israelis to connect to on an emotional level.

Iran, even with its toughest enemies, does not behave this way. It is certainly waging a struggle over influence, and sometimes that struggle turns into a violent confrontation. But the working assumption of its national security is that nobody in the region is going anywhere. Iran does not seek to make Saudi Arabia disappear so it can take over the Middle East, and it isn't trying to establish a web of Shiite republics. Iran sees itself as on the defensive, and seeks to build foundations that will keep its revolutionary project standing.

It sounds like nationalism of the Iranian regime is far stronger than its religiosity.

Absolutely. They are Iranians first and foremost with a kind of Shiite nationalism, much the same way Jewish nationalism is an Israeli invention.

I want to move toward more concrete, day-to-day politics. Why do you think Iran has yet to respond to Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July?

Iran has nothing to gain from attacking Israel, and it has plenty to gain from *not* attacking Israel. Israel has worked very hard to convince the world that it is the good guy and that Iran is the bad guy. What Israel did not conceive was that this notion could be flipped on its head, and this is what is happening.

Hamas supporters take part in a protest following the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, in the West Bank city of Hebron, July 31, 2024. (Wisam Hashlamoun/Flash90)

It's not that Iran is now beloved by the world. But we in Israel are not aware how much our international standing has not only eroded — it has been radically transformed. Now we are boogeymen. *We* are the genocidaires. *We* are the uncompromising fanatics. And we make Iran look really good.

Does the election of [Masoud Pezeshkian](#) as president present new opportunities for the West to engage with the Islamic Republic? What kind of leeway does he actually have to make any significant changes in that arena?

Every revolutionary movement contains a struggle within it between those who believe in an

“ongoing revolution,” and those who want to leverage the revolution to enhance stability and quality of life for the country. Pezeshkian belongs to the latter group, as opposed to, say, the Revolutionary Guards. And while he is very loyal to the Islamic Republic, he believes that its longevity is a function of its ability to promise its citizens security and a better future. As such, he very much does not want to see Iran become embroiled in all kinds of problems, which is precisely why when he was told [by the West] not to respond to Israel’s attack, he did not attack.

What is the significance of Iran [obtaining nuclear weapons](#)? How do you think this will affect the balance of power in the region, especially against Israel and the West?

For Iran, obtaining a nuclear weapon is a form of securing guarantees. It would force the rest of the world to treat the Islamic Republic as an entity that cannot simply be annihilated. Remember that during the Iran-Iraq war [1980-88], both the Americans and the Soviets supported Iraq. So the idea is that the Iranians will have something to put on the table that will force [other countries] to respect it at the most basic level. For them, recognizing the Islamic Republic is extremely significant.

Iran’s nuclear program is first and foremost a form of deterrence, and in this sense Israel and Iran are identical. Iran does not speak of using its nuclear program for the purpose of attacking; they truly see it as defensive. They view themselves as constantly under attack, not only by Israel, and believe that their allies, at any given moment, could switch sides.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu giving a presentation about Iran’s nuclear program in a press conference at the Kirya government headquarters in Tel Aviv, April 30, 2018. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

A nuclear Iran will have a significant effect on its relations with Israel and the West — as nuclear deterrence always does. On the one hand, should Iran obtain a nuclear weapon, it will only make the dynamic with Israel even tougher and more violent, but it will also force a recognition of Iran’s presence and interests.

The entire discourse of “preventing Iran’s nuclear program” is ludicrous. Iran has the [nuclear] capabilities. That Israel can plant malware [to cause substantial damage to Iran’s nuclear program] or bomb Iranian sites is nonsense. Obtaining nuclear arms is a political decision.

Iran stands to gain a lot by not declaring whether it has obtained such a weapon. On the one hand, it does not commit itself to everything that comes with [a weapon], such as the violation of international treaties and further sanctions. But it also refuses to sit in silence and take everything Israel dishes out. Do not forget how belligerent Israel is — it has killed and kidnapped Iranians on their own soil, and it has bombed Iran.

Many Israelis have, over the last months, grown angry with you for writing that Iran is acting like the “responsible adult” vis-a-vis Israel and the wider region. What did you mean by this?

Iran has always had a complex and rational approach to regional and national security issues, while attempting to gain influence in the region. [But others] instead insist on depicting the Islamic Republic as nothing more than a state of bloodthirsty fanatical barbarians who only care about their honor. Yes, Iran is a dictatorship with many, many dark aspects to it, and there is no need to whitewash this fact. But there are many countries like this around the world — some of whom Israel [regularly sells weapons systems to](#).

People examine arms at ISDEF 2022, Tel Aviv, March 21, 2022. (Avshalom Sassoni/Flash90)

You're saying that Iran is acting like any state would were it surrounded by enemies.

Yes, and it does so in the name of a religious minority [in the region], which makes up the majority in Iran. See if you can think of another example [laughs]. [But Israel seeks influence] in the United States, where you don't have these extremely large militias like in the Middle East — you have [AIPAC](#).

You're comparing Hezbollah to AIPAC?

I am saying that states look for influence wherever they can find it. The reality is that in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon there are powerful militias. Am I comparing Hezbollah to AIPAC? No, Hezbollah is a violent and oppressive militia. But does Hezbollah represent some kind of uncompromising Iranian intransigence? Not at all. Lebanon is a country of militias — and Israel should know that, since it has a history of openly supporting some of those militias.

Can you explain the significance of this week's attack on Hezbollah and Lebanon? Why did Israel choose to attack now rather than during a more open phase of the war in the north?

Israel has no strategy, it excels in tactics only. The reason the pagers and cell phones exploded now is because Israel clearly planned this operation months in advance, and felt like it had to strike while the iron is hot. This is no different than the assassination of Haniyeh. Israel works according to necessities and constraints that it creates for itself.

Television screens broadcast the speech of Secretary-general of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah outside a shop in the West Bank city of Nablus, August 25, 2024.(Nasser Ishtayeh/Flash90)

This attack is a blow to Hezbollah's image, since Israel shows that it has intelligence superior to everyone else in the region. But on the other hand, it reveals the limits of Israel's power. I think Israel wants Hezbollah to start a full-blown war — [Netanyahu doesn't feel he has a mandate](#) from the public to start that war, so he needs Hezbollah to launch it. But Hezbollah has repeatedly said that it began firing [after October 7] in solidarity with Gaza, and will settle its account with Israel in the future.

The common question you will hear from Israelis is as follows: what are we supposed to do in a situation in which there is an armed group to its north [Hezbollah] that attacks both civilians and soldiers, and repeatedly violates agreements. How do you respond to that?

I would say that Israel violates those agreements no less than Hezbollah does. Israel accuses Hezbollah of violating UN Resolution 1701 [which sought to resolve the 2006 Lebanon War], but neither side has ever respected that decision, and [both sides were happy not to do so](#) — that is, until October 7. Israel should do everything it can to reach an agreement with the Lebanese state that would incentivize it to create a real buffer between Hezbollah and Israel's northern border.

Before we move on, I want to point out the false assumption [of Israelis] in your question — that Hezbollah will continue attacking until Israel is destroyed, for the simple reason that this is Hezbollah's *raison d'être*. That's simply not true. Israel is Hezbollah's enemy and the group certainly fights it, but it also has a number of weaknesses vis-a-vis Israel, most prominently that as opposed to Israel, a sovereign state recognized by the UN, Hezbollah is a non-state actor.

Instead of taking advantage of those weaknesses, Israel turns to targeted assassinations, killing Hezbollah's military leadership deep in Lebanese territory. Meanwhile, Hezbollah accumulates intelligence on Israel, ravages the north, and pins down much of the states' military capabilities — which is exactly what it said it would do from the beginning.

View of a wildfire following a missile attack from Lebanon, near Kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar, northern Israel, August 17, 2024. (Ayal Margolin/Flash90)

What does this say about the Lebanese state, which is barely functioning as is, and its responsibility for Hezbollah's actions?

You're right that the state hardly functions, but it exists. You need to remember that Hezbollah does not work *against* the Lebanese state or try to undermine it. Hezbollah is part of Lebanon because this is the political arrangement in the country, in which every confessional group has its own leadership, its own zones of influence, and its own militias. In this sense, Hezbollah is no different from the Druze, the Maronites, or the various Sunni groups in Lebanon.

You would think that Israel has an interest in strengthening the Lebanese state in order to undermine Hezbollah, and the way to do that is to sign an agreement between the two countries. [But Israelis] will argue that this kind of agreement is meaningless when Hezbollah wants to annihilate Israel. And again you're back to square one. If your working assumption is that Hezbollah and Iran are entirely dedicated to nothing more than wiping out Israel, then you have no choice but to wipe them out yourself.

You see how this exact logic is playing out in Gaza. Israelis say they do not want to kill Palestinian civilians, but [will also say] is it really our fault that Hamas surrounds itself with human shields and hides among civilians? And if we dig deeper, won't we find out that those same civilians expressed joy on October 7? Or maybe they are allowing the Hamas fighters to enter humanitarian zones? Or maybe all the children who are born in Gaza are going to grow up to be terrorists? So what difference does it make who we kill?

The question isn't whether Israel or Hezbollah is in the right, but how we can imagine a future. When you sign a peace agreement with an enemy, you don't know whether it will hold up its end of the deal. You try to build yourselves guarantees, but you build them knowing that you have an interest in making peace. Israel consistently works to achieve the exact opposite.



Maoz Inon, one of the organizers of the Israeli-Palestinian peace conference in the Menora Arena calling for an end to the war and a solution to the conflict, Tel Aviv, July 1, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

How does one go about signing a peace deal with Lebanon when there is such overwhelming opposition to doing so?

I am not talking about a peace deal. I am talking about an agreement that will resolve the border issue between Israel and Lebanon according to the parameters laid out in Resolution 1701. To do so requires a few prerequisites: Israel must agree to international guarantees, and a force that will not only create a buffer between Hezbollah and Israel, but will also prevent Israel from violating Lebanon's sovereignty — and this agreement must hold for two years. After that you move on to the next step. Is there risk involved? Of course. But the belief that, left to its own devices, Lebanon wants to destroy Israel is completely false.

This is exactly the same discourse regarding Palestinian support for Hamas. If I were in Gaza right now, and somebody asked me whether I support Hamas, of course I would say yes. Does this mean that I would have always supported them or that I support any and all forms of violence? Of course not. This is a very stubborn Israeli problem, almost a disease. We adamantly refuse to recognize that circumstances change, and that people can form different opinions or even change them.

Let's go back to Iran. Israeli politicians and media outlets will often claim that Iran is behind all Palestinian resistance and violence, including the brutal massacres of October 7, and therefore we should be focusing on the Islamic Republic above all other actors.

These claims are completely bogus and have a single goal: whitewashing the occupation. Iran is certainly an enemy of Israel, but the idea that every horrible thing that happens to Israelis is the result of Iranian involvement cannot even be labeled a conspiracy — it is a fabrication that was deliberately invented to absolve Israel of its responsibility for its actions.

People walk next to a large sign written "the end of the Ayatollah's regime in Iran" on a building, May 20, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

Many, including Palestinians, believe Iran doesn't truly care about the liberation of Palestine, and is only using the issue as a tool to confront Israel. How do you understand the relationship between Iran and the Palestinian struggle?

I don't really think Iran cares about the liberation of Palestine, though I am not sure that this is a tool to confront Israel so much as it is a means of stabilizing itself and spreading its influence in the Middle East, all while irritating its Israeli enemy. Iran is neither fundamentally nor ideologically committed to Palestinian liberation, and a final-status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians will be bad for the Islamic Republic, since it will take away one of its biggest talking points of standing up for the oppressed people of the world.

On the other hand, an Israeli-Palestinian agreement will rid the Iranians of this issue, which they feel is a headache but still need to intervene in. If one lets go of the idea that Iran is wholly dedicated to the annihilation of Israel, they will see that its support for the Palestinian cause is little more than a tactic for promoting Iranian interests.

I can only assume that if the Palestinians and Israelis reach some kind of deal, whether to establish a Palestinian state or a single state between the river and the sea — Iran will not oppose it. How will the "day after" look? We'll have to wait and see.

Edo Konrad

P.S.

- +972. September 20, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/iran-israel-hezbollah-ori-goldberg/>
- Edo Konrad is the former editor-in-chief of +972 Magazine.
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged

Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

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We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

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