

Netanyahu Must Go

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It's no secret to readers of this column where I stand on Israel's war in Gaza.

Israel must destroy Hamas as a military and political force in the territory while minimizing harm to civilians. It must do what it can to rescue its hostages without jeopardizing the overriding goal of destroying Hamas. It must, by diplomacy or force, push Hezbollah back from Lebanon's southern border, so that [60,000 Israelis](#) can return safely to their homes in the north. It must take the battle directly, as it did last week in Damascus, to Hamas's and Hezbollah's patrons, whether in Syria, Qatar or Iran.

And for all of that to happen effectively, Benjamin Netanyahu must go.

I've written versions of this column [before](#), but Netanyahu's disastrous engagement with Hamas before it carried out the Oct. 7 massacre and his conduct of the war since have made it vital. The need was again made painfully obvious last Thursday, when Nir Barkat, a center-right Israeli minister and former Jerusalem mayor, [got destroyed on MSNBC's "Morning Joe."](#) Barkat is a decent and courageous man who could be a credible future prime minister. But he crumbled when the program's host Joe Scarborough challenged him to explain Netanyahu's policies before Oct. 7.

Why — to paraphrase Scarborough and his co-hosts — was Netanyahu asking Qatar to fund Hamas to the tune of hundreds of millions just weeks before the massacre? Why was the bulk of the Israeli military nowhere near Gaza in the first hours of the attack? Why does the Israeli government have such fumbling answers when it comes to legitimate humanitarian needs in Gaza?

Barkat offered, feebly, that the policy had been mistaken and that everything would be investigated after the war. When an Israeli minister is forced to humiliate himself on American TV because he can muster neither the sophistry nor the servility that a smoother answer would require, it's a sign he's in the wrong government.

Where does Israel find itself after six months of war? Not in a good place. Netanyahu and his generals keep insisting, [Westmoreland-like](#), that victory in Gaza is around the corner while providing tallies of Hamas fighters killed.

But Hamas isn't defeated and Israeli soldiers have been forced to recapture the same places — like Gaza City's Al Shifa hospital — that were supposed to have been cleared of terrorists months ago. Only a handful of hostages have been rescued and many of those who remain are [presumed dead](#). The perception of Israeli invincibility and competence has been shattered. As my colleague David French has noted, the approach that Israel has employed in Gaza in recent months — destroying the enemy but ignoring civilian needs for security and basic necessities — [replicates the strategy](#) that led to disaster in the early years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

The strike last week that killed seven World Central Kitchen aid workers was surely an accident, much like the [U.S. strike on a Doctors Without Borders hospital](#) in Afghanistan in 2015 that killed 42 people. But the command-and-

control failures that produced the W.C.K. tragedy show that Israel's military leadership doesn't realize they can't afford those kinds of fiascos, as other militaries can. A double standard, but that's another reality under which Israel has always operated.

Netanyahu may not bear direct blame for the W.C.K. deaths. But he bears the ultimate one, just as he does for everything that led to Oct. 7 — funding Hamas and ignoring [warnings of its plans to attack](#), bringing far-right rabble-rousers into his government and giving them key positions in the security establishment, polarizing the country with an unnecessary judicial reform bill and dismissing [repeated warnings of diminished military readiness](#). In a thousand years, Jews will remember Netanyahu's name with scorn — all the more so for his refusal to take responsibility for anything.

Now he makes the argument that there should be no change in government till the war ends. That argument looks increasingly self-serving the longer the war drags out.

It's also a bad argument. Parliamentary democracies that find themselves saddled with bad leaders in moments of national emergency do well when they get rid of those leaders. That's what Britain did in World War I when it cashiered H.H. Asquith in favor of David Lloyd George, and in World War II when it got rid of Neville Chamberlain in favor of Winston Churchill. Netanyahu might aspire to be Winston, but is really more of a Neville, whose bad deals with bad guys led to bad things.

It's dangerous for a country at war to be led by someone the people neither support nor trust. Seventy-one percent of Israelis want Netanyahu booted from office, [according to polls released Sunday](#), and 66 percent want elections called early, which could happen if a handful of members of the ruling coalition defected. Wishing Netanyahu gone is the most mainstream position possible — and one sincere friends of Israel should never be afraid to express.

I hope Barkat reflects on his "Morning Joe" embarrassment and asks whether sticking by his party's leader is a price he's willing to pay. I hope other senior members in Israel's government also consider their sense of national responsibility above their political positions. Israel cannot afford to lose this war. But it needs to lose a leader who isn't winning it.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/09/opinion/netanyahu-israel.html>