

## Israel and Gaza: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

**Ramesh Thakur**

Veterans of Middle East affairs say wryly that anyone who claims to understand the Israel-Palestine conflict has been misinformed. The conflict has probably yielded more Nobel Peace prizes than any other region, yet peace in the Middle East is unlikely in our lifetime and may not eventuate in God's lifetime. The competing moral arguments—that reparations for the Europeans' genocide against Jews was paid in Palestinian currency and that the right of Israel to exist as the Jewish homeland was earned with the lives of millions of Jews exterminated in the Holocaust—are not directed at each other, but to the world at large. The most recent outbreak of deadly violence, when swarms of Hamas fighters attacked southern Israel on October 7 (10/7), occurred against the backdrop of decades of unremitting hostility and killings. The century-old conflict has neither been resolved, nor even frozen, merely paused until the next killing of a Palestinian by an Israeli policeman or settler, or the next Israeli killed by an Arab terrorist or Hamas rocket.

This paper begins with a review of the complex and emotionally fraught history of the conflict. The second part looks at 10/7 and Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza in retaliation. The final part speculates on possible pathways to the conflict's resolution that could amount to more than another truce in the endless cycle of violence.

### **Yesterday: The Endemic Equilibrium that Was**

The origins and complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict have deep roots in history, prejudice against the Jews embedded in Christendom, European colonialism, and power asymmetries between Israel and its enemies in the region. Politics explain the creation of the state of Israel, the life-threatening hostility directed at it by various groups in the region

and its grim determination to defend its very existence by any means of its own choosing, stretching the boundaries of permissibility in the process by unilateral interpretation. The core issues that sustain the conflict include Israel's right to exist, the Israeli occupation of land conquered in wars, the fate of Palestinian refugees, of Jewish settlements in occupied West Bank, the status of Jerusalem, and a state of Palestine.

The Palestinian wounds of ethnic cleansing, homelessness and national yearning for lost lands mirror those of the Jews. The Zionist claim that a Jewish homeland in Palestine provided 'a land without people for a people without land' was as wrong as is the Palestinians' denial of the Jews' deep ancient and religious connection to the same land. Palestinians are the region's original refugees expelled from their ancestral land. The Israeli insistence that all the Palestinians left voluntarily in 1948 is also a self-serving myth. Each side has its catalogue of atrocities by the other.

Israelis look outwards from their nation and see heavily armed hostile forces, backed by several Arab countries, unwilling to acknowledge Israel's right to exist and committed to the destruction of their state and expulsion of their people from the region. Palestinians look across the border and see de facto colonial overlords living on lands and farms of their ancestors, unchecked expansion of Jewish settlements backed by oppressive security policies, and continual excuses for deferring the creation of a genuinely sovereign Palestinian state. Instead the Israeli strategy for 'managing' rather than solving the core conflict turned into the odious '[mowing the grass](#)', with periodic incursions into Gaza to cut Hamas down to a size that Israel no longer considered a threat.

Amidst these duelling myths and deeply ingrained historical memories, reciprocal goodwill and common frames of understanding have been in scarce supply. Little wonder that successive decades have witnessed multiple lost opportunities. While Israel thrived in the pre-10/7 status quo, Palestine was stuck in permanent poverty and misery. The humiliating occupation proved fertile recruiting ground for Israel- and Jew-hating militants and terrorists.

If Hamas resistance is defined by terror, Israeli occupation is rule by fear and overwhelming brute force that confiscates or razes Palestinian property and colonises Palestinian land with impunity. Regional and global politics explain the failure to hold the main conflict parties accountable for their illegal and criminal acts in the self-repeating cycles of escalation, civilian casualties and impunity.

Conduct that many Western governments would consider unacceptable for themselves or others, is rationalised or not opposed when done by Israel owing to Holocaust guilt. Equally, however, because of the powerful continuing resonance of the Holocaust, the Jewish nation is not prepared to tolerate existential threats to its only homeland, nor willing to depend ever again on others' goodwill for its survival. Instead, Israel is determined to ensure its continued existence as a Jewish nation and as the only state for the Jews by its own means, including whatever brute force it takes. Thus, Israel is as grimly determined to defend, protect and preserve its existence as its enemies are to destroy it.

The UN General Assembly that in [Resolution 181](#) (1947) approved the partition plan to create the state of Israel by a 33-13 vote majority was a Western-dominated body at the time. The dissenting votes better reflected the balance of UN membership in the post-colonial world with successive waves of decolonisation.

The Human Rights Council in Geneva is focussed obsessively on Israel; the veto-paralysed Security Council in New York compensates by granting Israel virtual immunity against defying a succession of resolutions over the decades; and the international criminal justice machinery has conferred virtual impunity on Israeli generals and Hamas commanders from independent international investigation and prosecution. The combined result of the three separate pathologies is to discredit the entire UN machinery in almost all relevant constituencies in the core Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **Today: The Status Quo Shattered Beyond Repair**

The boxer Mike Tyson is often quoted as having said that everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. That's a more pithy version of a quote attributed to 19<sup>th</sup> century Field Marshall [Helmuth von Moltke the Elder](#), architect of Germany's Unifications Wars (1864–71): 'No plan survives contact with the enemy'. The scale, surprise factor, depraved brutality, weaponisation of sexual violence, and large-scale abduction of Israelis as hostages might have broken beyond repair the endless loop of Hamas and Israeli policies described in the previous section: *Attack, retaliate, rinse, repeat when desired*.

Hamas terrorists deliberately killed babies, women and civilians in the carefully planned 'pogrom' on 10/7. [Maps and manuals](#) on the bodies of dead Hamas terrorists identified the locations of nurseries among targets and instructed them to kill problematic hostages, separate men from women and children, and use hostages as 'cannon fodder' by 'ensuring they are clearly visible'. The immediate analogy for Israel's 10/7 was America's 9/11. However, scaled to the US population, the numbers killed and abducted are closer to the 58,000 US soldiers who died in the entire Vietnam War. Recalling the traumatic legacy of Vietnam on the American imagination, register the reality that an equivalent number of Israelis were methodically massacred in just one day. This is why Hamas and Israel cannot coexist and there is no pathway ahead without the defeat and destruction of Hamas.

The political calculations by the Hamas leadership would have sought to provoke Israeli retaliatory strikes on the densely populated Gaza strip in order to inflame the Arab street, enrage Muslims around the world and provoke anti-Israeli demonstrations around the world. It was a cynical and calculated ploy to kill as many Jews as possible in Israel, and also to sacrifice large numbers of Palestinian lives in Gaza in pursuit of the political goals of Hamas.

Hamas thus has little incentive to minimise civilian casualties, giving it an [asymmetric advantage in the propaganda war](#). Every Palestinian civilian killed by Israeli strikes strengthens support for Hamas locally, regionally and globally, and is a PR disaster for Israel. Every Israeli civilian killed by Hamas fighters is a propaganda coup and morale booster for

Hamas and weakens the compact between the citizens and state of Israel on keeping Jews safe in their ancient homeland.

### **Duelling objectives**

Hamas's objectives in launching the attacks were to kill, rape, maim, mutilate, burn, kidnap and subject to public humiliation on the streets of Gaza as many Israelis as possible; undermine Israelis' confidence in their government's ability to protect them; provoke a reaction of extreme violence from Israel that would flood the streets of Western cities with massive crowds shouting pro-Palestinian/Hamas slogans and spewing Jew hatred; secure the international isolation of Israel; dismantle the [Abraham Accords](#); and disrupt the process of normalisation of relations with Arab states. [Israel's strategy](#) in the ensuing Gaza war has had five aims: dismantle Hamas, reduce risks to Israeli soldiers, recover the hostages, limit civilian casualties, and avoid widening the war beyond Gaza.

In summary, Israel has achieved better than expected battlefield successes in Gaza but suffered political and diplomatic setbacks with the explosion of mass protests against its actions on Western streets and antisemitic speeches, as well as critical resolutions in the UN General Assembly. The issue of Palestine has climbed to the top of the Middle East and international agendas. Support for Hamas has risen in Gaza and the West Bank. Support for Palestinians at the expense of Israel has risen among wider sectors of Western publics, cultural and intellectual elites, and politicians. There has been a spike in recorded antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents in several Western countries including Australia, Britain, Canada and the US. There is a widespread instinct to problematise, contextualise and rationalise terrorism as acts of resistance in the great cause of decolonisation that divides the world into settlers and oppressed. Hamas's ideology of Israel's destruction is fused with identity politics which treats Israel as the region's colonial, racist and oppressor power.

Israel has been engaged in the most challenging and fraught urban war in living memory. Weeks of air strikes to degrade Hamas's military capability and infrastructure were followed by a [ground assault](#) that has given Israel control of northern and central Gaza. In a world of instantaneous social media, progress in the accompanying information war is more mixed. In the combined military-cum-narrative wars, Israel was caught in the classic pincer trap of insurgencies: it loses by not winning but Hamas wins by merely surviving. The imbalance worsened as the battlefield shifted to southern Gaza.

*The Wall Street Journal* reported on December 29 that the Israeli military is having to confront some [uncomfortable truths](#). Because it is virtually impossible to destroy Hamas without destroying Gaza, Hamas is unlikely to be totally annihilated. It has shown both [military and political resilience](#) against Israeli assaults and targeted assassinations. Israel's military chief has admitted that the [war with Hamas could take months](#), having already lasted a lot longer than most previous wars. The two goals of killing Hamas leaders and rescuing Israeli hostages often collide. There's obvious tension between Israeli hearts (bring hostages home to restore the state-citizens covenant) and minds (destroy Hamas for long-term security of Israel as the Jewish state), presenting Israel with 'Sophie's choice'. As [Yaakov Katz](#), a former editor, wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*, 'We owe it to the hostages to do

almost everything to get them home, but we also owe the nine million citizens of this country to ensure that what happened will never happen again'. As the new year began, 132 Israelis were still being held hostage in Gaza.

Escalation can be vertical, an intensification of the fighting between the existing conflict parties in volume of engagement, using weaponry of increasing lethality, or expanding the choice of targets. Or it can be horizontal, spreading geographically to additional regions (e.g. the West Bank, southern Lebanon) or actors (Hezbollah, Houthis, Iran).

Israel's vertical escalation includes the [targeted assassination](#) of  [Hamas deputy leader](#) Saleh al-Aroui in Beirut on 2 January and  [Hezbollah leader](#) Wissam al-Tawil and drone chief Ali Hussein Barji in south Lebanon on 8 and 9 January. But Hamas political leader Yahya Sinwar and military leader Mohammed Deif remain at large. The US-UK [strikes](#) on the Houthis in Yemen on 11 January are evidence that the Gaza war has already expanded horizontally to entangle additional actors. However, Hezbollah and Iran have not so far intervened directly.

### **Genocide and International Humanitarian Law**

Placards in Western countries that quickly [framed the conflict as one for racial justice](#)—Palestine can't breathe and Palestinian Lives Matter—leveraged the perception of Palestinians as the dispossessed victims. Across Western cities, police inaction against mass protests have enabled hate to fester. The solemn pledge of 'Never Again' has given way to a 'Here we go again' shrug at the return, 78 years after the Holocaust, of the threat of Jewish extermination. The chants on Western streets and campuses as well as on the Arab street have called for Jews to be gassed, taunted them that the army of Muhammad that massacred Jews in the seventh century will return, urged the globalisation of the intifada, and issued a call to arms for jihad. The terrorists have been valorised, Israel vilified, Jews attacked and threatened, posters of the missing hostages torn down.

The angry chants show ignorance of history that has memorialised the existential threat to Jews and of geography that poses an existential threat to Israel as their state. Progressives who attack women's rights advocates as Nazis guilty of transgender genocide, celebrate the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. The clueless 'Queers and LGBTI+ for Palestine' protestors would risk being thrown from rooftops and stoned to death in Hamas-ruled Gaza.

Wars are not ended decisively nor early with a 'proportionate' use of force. Ceasefires are not always neutral in their impact. Extremist groups can use them to rest, recover, regroup, recruit, rearm and return to terrorism. There is also the moral hazard of validating the tactic of taking civilians hostage as human shields. Israelis are not far wrong in saying they use missile defence to protect their civilians, while Hamas uses civilians to shield missiles. Israel doesn't directly target civilians. Mistakes occur and civilians are killed but not intentionally targeted.

The legal requirement of [proportionality](#) does not mean in proportion to the initial attack but in relation to the military objective. Civilian casualties are deeply regrettable in any war, but also inevitable in every war. International humanitarian law (IHL) developed in recognition of this double reality and is a valuable normative instrument to regulate armed

conflict between military forces. Against the reality of groups that wage war with no thought of being restricted by any normative constraints, however, IHL rests in a world of make-believe fiction. Its [three key principles](#) are *distinction* between soldiers and non-combatant civilians, *proportionality* in the use of force, and *necessity* of force being the option of last resort to achieve the objective. The principles fall apart in the 'context' of Hamas: its identity as a heavily armed militia, not soldiers in uniform; its tactics of targeting Israeli civilians and endangering Palestinian civilians as human shields by placing its fighters under hospitals and storing ammunition in schools; its strategy of inflaming anti-Israeli opinion everywhere to delegitimise the Jewish state; and its explicit, Charter goal of liquidating Israel and ethnically cleansing Jews.

The [fourth Geneva Convention](#) (1949) deals with the protection of civilians during armed conflict. The protection of hospitals is covered in [Article 19](#). It states that their entitlement to protection ceases if 'they are used to commit... acts harmful to the enemy'. A [commentary](#) published in 1958 by the ICRC, the custodian of the Geneva Convention, clarified that examples of such harmful acts 'include the use of a hospital as a shelter for able-bodied combatants or fugitives, as an arms or ammunition store, as a military observation post, or as a centre for liaison with fighting troops'. Israel has taken journalists into Gaza hospitals to show the arms recovered and evidence of their use by Hamas fighters as command posts and to hold hostages. US intelligence also concluded that [Hamas is using hospitals as command-and-control centres](#). This makes them legitimate military targets with some conditions that Israel has tried to satisfy.

'Genocide' (the crime of crimes) is a neologism coined by Raphael Lemkin to describe Nazi German atrocities against the Jews in the first half of the twentieth century. The Genocide Convention, adopted on December 9, 1948, was a milestone in defining genocide as a crime against humanity and thus a matter of universal criminal jurisdiction. Lemkin was discovered weeping in a UN corridor at the news of its adoption that owed so much to his moral engagement with the effort. He described the convention as an epitaph for his mother who had been among many members of his family killed in the Holocaust.

Genocide is a precise legal term. Deploying it to describe any large-scale use of force would mean that any major war is a genocide: the two world wars, the French, US, Chinese revolutions, the US civil war, etc. The realist American scholar [John Mearsheimer](#) believes that the South African dossier presented to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging Israeli genocide in Gaza 'is comprehensive, well written, well-argued, and thoroughly documented'. It sketches the big picture without neglecting the details. The calls by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich to [depopulate Gaza](#) and resettle it with Israelis will only lend credence to the charge of genocide.

Even so, accusing Israel of genocide is topsy-turvy. Hamas is guilty of the double war crimes of deliberately targeting Israeli civilians for atrocities and of endangering Gaza civilians by hiding its fighters and weaponry behind civilian lines. By its founding charter, deeds and words, Hamas would commit genocide of Israelis, plus the ethnic cleansing of Jews in the catch-cry 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free', if it could. But it cannot do so. By contrast Israel could commit genocide of Gazans, but chooses not to, limiting civilian casualties as far as possible when hunting Hamas operatives amidst civilian communities.



In a related vein, there was an arresting [headline](#) in a recent *Guardian* article: 'Emissions from Israel's war in Gaza have "immense" effect on climate catastrophe', written by Nina Lakhani, their 'climate justice reporter'. The first thought in response was: Would Israel be engaged in military operations in Gaza today if Hamas had not attacked on 10/7? Clearly not. Therefore, the blame for any resulting climate injustice lies with Hamas. The second response was: If, however, Israel is to blame, then on this logic no country is permitted to defend itself no matter how clear, grave and brutal the armed aggression against it.

### **The fading relevance of the United Nations**

In a possibly apocryphal story, a diplomat is said to have remarked that when the UN steps into a dispute between small states, the conflict disappears. Between a big power and a small state, the latter disappears. Between big powers, the UN disappears.

On October 23, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council that the Hamas attacks 'did not happen in a [vacuum](#)', provoking outrage and demands for resignation from Israel. Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur for Palestinian human rights, [tweeted](#) on October 7: 'Today's violence must be put in context'. In 2014, she had written the US is 'subjugated by the Jewish lobby' and Europe burdened with 'guilt about the Holocaust'. This is why they 'condemn the oppressed – the Palestinians'. A tweet from South African Tlaleng Mofokeng, the special rapporteur on health, justified the attacks as armed resistance against an apartheid regime.

On December 12, meeting in an emergency special session, the UN General Assembly adopted, by a 153-10 (23 abstentions) vote, a resolution calling for 'an [immediate humanitarian ceasefire](#)', humanitarian access into Gaza and the unconditional release of all hostages. Hamas was not mentioned by name in the resolution. US President Joe [Biden](#) has affirmed Israel's right to defend itself but warned of the mounting toll of civilian casualties, demanded Israeli compliance with IHL, and called for a pause in hostilities to enable the exit of foreign nationals caught in the ceasefire and the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

World leaders should address their appeals, not to Israel, but to Hamas. Israel's ambassador to Australia [Amir Maimon](#) repeats the oft-made arguments by Israel that 'The war could be over tomorrow if Hamas surrender, gave up its arms and released its hostages'.

Then there's UN Women. In an [article](#) in *Newsweek* on November 22 to mark International Day for the Prevention of Violence against Women, Israel's First Lady Michal Herzog recalled just a few incidents of the brutality, rape, mutilation and incineration of women in southern Israel by Hamas terrorists on 10/7. A pregnant woman tortured and her foetus torn out. Women and girls raped with such violence that their pelvic bones were broken. The terrorists themselves broadcast videos they filmed of a naked woman paraded through the streets of Gaza. Of a woman with bloodied pants being pulled into a jeep by her hair at gunpoint to be taken across to Gaza. A mother's breast sliced off in the presence of her six- and eight-year-olds and the whole family then killed. On December 28, *The New York Times* published a detailed special investigation documenting how Hamas had [weaponised sexual violence](#) on October 7.

‘Organizations like UN Women exist to protect women from such crimes’, Herzog wrote. Israeli activists and experts have been fully involved and invested in the international efforts. Hence the shock at ‘The inconceivable and unforgiveable silence of these organisations when faced with the rape and murder of Israeli women’. ‘It is not that condemnations of gender-based violence by Hamas have been weak or insufficient – there have been none at all... They failed us, and all women, at this critical moment’. Its silence on the brutal and depraved sexual assaults on women and children in Israel on 10/7– ‘a moment of crushing disappointment’ (Herzog) – shames and diminishes UN Women, betrays the founding purpose of the United Nations, trashes its proud legacy of universalising the human rights norm and discredits the entire UN human rights machinery.

Israel’s war—in Gaza but on Hamas—is not taking place ‘in a [vacuum](#)’, to use Guterres’s words. It must be contextualised by history, geography, demography and Israel’s strategic logic of deterrence based on military asymmetry and disproportionate casualties. An immediate ceasefire necessarily means accepting the October 7 attacks as a *fait accompli*, rewarding the brutal Hamas tactics of killing, kidnapping and sacrificing Israeli and Palestinian civilians, denying Israel the right to self-defence in practice while paying lip service to it in rhetoric, and encouraging repeats of the cycle not just by Hamas, but also by other terrorist groups mimicking the successful Hamas tactics and strategy.

### **Tomorrow: Re-establishing Israel’s Asymmetric Deterrence and Escalation Dominance**

But how can Palestinians’ humiliations be replaced by dignity, fear give way to hope, and apprehensions turn into aspirations?

#### **Israeli introspection**

After the war ends and Gaza has been cleansed of Hamas, Israel must both look back and ahead. It must answer three questions regarding the failures of intelligence, physical barriers and tardy response by the army on October 7. According to a detailed [BBC reconstruction](#), several armed Palestinian groups trained together in military-style exercises and conducted four realistic drills between December 2020 and September 2023. How did Israel miss all this? It’s also hard to see Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, captain of the ship of state on the day of the worst attacks on Jews since the Holocaust, staying in office. This will be especially so if an inquiry should confirm longstanding [allegations](#) of his complicity in shoring up Hamas against the Palestinian Authority (PA).

A second urgent task will be to restore public confidence in the government. In an [Israel Democracy Institute poll](#) on November 24, Israelis expressed doubt over confidence by 63-28 per cent margin that the government has a plan of action for the day after the war. Encouragingly, support for amending the nation-state law to protect the principle of full equality of non-Jewish citizens had gone up from 40 to 56 per cent in one month of the war. This mirrored the rise in [Arab Israeli feelings of kinship](#) with the state from 48 to 94 per cent from June to November.



Third, this must be accompanied by brutally honest self-reflection by Israelis on the absolute necessity of backing tough security measures with cutting back on settlements and remnants of occupation, and searching earnestly for political accommodation with Palestinian and Arab partners for peace. Jews cannot be colonisers of their own ancestral land that is also intimately woven into their core religious texts. However, many Palestinians have been driven from their homes and farms in the project to establish Israel as the world's one Jewish state. The memory of that trauma is transmitted across generations and Jew hatred marinates in that grievance.

### **Neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan**

Very few Middle East wars have ended cleanly and the line between war and peace is usually blurry. Serially repeating cycles of eruptions of violence and ceasefires have produced bloodshed without end in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Netanyahu insisted on January 13 that the war in Gaza will continue: 'Nobody will stop us... [We will not stop](#) until we achieve victory'. The PA is [viewed by many Palestinians as well as Israelis](#) as weak, ineffectual, corrupt, nepotistic and authoritarian. Netanyahu declared on December 12 that Gaza will be [neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan](#) (that is, ruled neither by Hamas nor the Fatah, the PA). If Hamas is to be destroyed as a political force and a military threat, what will replace it? Preoccupation with the current war has meant this key question for the shape of the future has been mostly neglected.

Not all his cabinet colleagues distinguish between Hamas and the people. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir support the ['voluntary emigration'](#) of Palestinians and the return of Israeli settlers to Gaza, which sounds suspiciously like ethnic cleansing and is strongly opposed by other cabinet ministers. Netanyahu himself [tweeted](#) on January 10: 'Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population'. His war is with Hamas terrorists, not the Palestinian population.

For a viable future that breaks the merciless cycle of violence, death, destruction, and heartbreak, both Israelis and Palestinians must come to a recognition of each other's traumas. Both sides must renounce dehumanising caricatures, ['eliminationist fantasies'](#) and demands, and instead acknowledge each other's victimhood. In practice this means a double recognition of Israel's right to exist as the world's only Jewish homeland and the Palestinians' right to their own state. The military destruction of Hamas may be necessary but will not suffice without diplomacy and negotiations that satisfy bottom lines while falling short of maximalist demands of both sides.

10/7 showed the folly of ignoring Gaza's governance. Growing authoritarian dysfunction in Gaza was mirrored by increasingly harsh right-wing parties in Israel justifying expanding settlements in the West Bank. As the centre collapsed among both Palestinians and Israelis, the cocktail of mutual hatreds proved deadly. The effect of 10/7 will be to strengthen Israeli determination to maintain an Israeli security regime in the West Bank divided into three zones under Israeli army control, Palestinian control, and joint control. Israel may also conclude that this offers a good model for Gaza.

Meanwhile Israel must accommodate the new normal of a dwindling international support base on two fronts. Within the West, a clear generational divide has opened up between younger people who are converts to the Palestinian cause at the expense of Israel. Globally, the recalibration of international alignments on the Israel-Palestine conflict are a stark demonstration also of the continuing loss of the West's ability to control the global geopolitical narrative and the strengthening of Iranian, Chinese and Russian footprints in the Middle East.

For example, writing in *The Hindu*, the Indo-Canadian scholar [Nissim Mannathukkaren](#) holds the West guilty of complicity in Israeli oppression of Palestinians that has its origins in colonialism and imperialism. Vijay Prashad, writing in the *Asia Times*, links the unprecedented global condemnation of the mass atrocities in Israel's 'genocidal' 'war on Palestine' to the [decline in the Global North's hegemony and legitimacy](#). As the West steadily loses its capacity to dominate the narrative on world affairs, it and Israel will have to come to terms with how the history of Israel–Palestine relations is perceived around the world.

### **How many steps in a step-by-step Roadmap for Peace?**

The government of Israel must navigate between the security demands of its own people and hardline political parties, international pressures especially from the US and Europeans, and demands for dignity, freedoms and development from Palestinians. Arab countries have to navigate the demands from their own publics to criticise Israel and not compromise on their maximalist support to the Palestinians amidst their own concerns about importing Hamas-led radicalisation and instability. Arguably also, their interest in negotiating a modus vivendi with Israel will wane if they judge Israel to have been significantly weakened by the war.

Netanyahu has listed three [prerequisites for peace](#): the destruction of Hamas, the demilitarisation of Gaza and the deradicalisation of Palestinian society. The last is required because the distinction between Hamas and the people of Gaza is a figment of the liberal Western imagination, not an accurate depiction of ground realities. On 14 November, the well-regarded, Ramallah-based Arab World for Research and Development published a [poll](#) that showed deep hostility and distrust in Gaza and the West Bank of Israel, the West and global media; interpretation of the conflict as an Israel-Palestinian war; and support for the creation of a Palestinian state 'from the river to the sea'.

Unfortunately, even if necessary, the three are far from sufficient conditions to assure sustainable peace. Any viable deal must include a realistic pathway for Palestinians' political future as well as ensure Israel's security. During a multi-nation trip through the Middle East that included Israel, the US—or at least the Biden administration—presented Israel with a [tough choice](#). Netanyahu could continue with existing policies and see the pattern repeated endlessly of 'the terrorism, the nihilism, the destruction by Hamas, by the Houthis, by Hezbollah, all backed by Iran'. If Israel chooses this path, they will have to deal on their own with the chaos and devastation resulting from the Gaza war. The alternative is an end to the Gaza war with Israel agreeing to a 'clear path' to Palestinian rights and a unified Palestinian state embracing Gaza and the West Bank. In return Israel would get the promise of regional integration and normalised relations with Arab neighbours.

Israel's hesitations might be rooted not just in its own tragic history, but also the consciousness of the irony that the United States, of all countries, that should be lecturing Israel on how to wage wars to win the peace. As Henry Kissinger said in 1968 warning against abandoning South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu, 'it may be dangerous to be America's enemy, but [to be America's friend is fatal](#)'.

Different conflict actors and independent commentators have proposed a variety of three-, four- and [five-step](#) roadmaps to peace in the Middle East the day after the current war ends.

[Defence Minister Yoav Gallant](#) presented a [four-point plan](#) on January 3 for civil rule in Gaza after the war ends. First, a multinational task force, led by European and Gulf countries, will oversee the reconstruction and economic rehabilitation of Gaza. Second, existing Palestinian administrative mechanisms to provide public services like water, sewage, electricity and health will continue, albeit free of Hamas elements. Third, Egypt will keep responsibility for the main civilian border crossing into Gaza. Finally, Israel intends to retain operational freedom of action throughout Gaza as a critical measure. Its control over the entry of goods into Gaza will continue, with some Israeli security specialists, for example Israel's national security adviser Meir Ben Shabbat (2017–21), demanding a reimposition of the [blockade](#) on Gaza.

The five-point proposal from Toda Senior Research Fellow [Lisa Schirch](#) calls for the protection of all civilians in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank; the dismantlement of Hamas; the dismantlement of Israeli occupation; embracing democracy movements and establishing links between Israeli and Palestinian movements; and addressing the twin traumas from antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The deradicalisation agenda will require dismantling and recreating the entire education system in Gaza and the West Bank, including the dismantlement of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees ([UNRWA](#)). The negative deradicalisation agenda must be accompanied by a positive plan to build physical infrastructure, foster economic development, and promote civil society and a democratic political culture. Post-1945 Germany and Japan offer successful historical examples of this.

Israel and the US-led Western countries have too often been seduced by putting dictators on the throne who will do their bidding while clamping down on the democratic aspirations of the people. This has contributed to the popular disenchantment with democracy. Israel's President Isaac Herzog recognises the critical importance of this. In an [interview](#) with *The Spectator* (UK), he said the post-war Gaza dispensation must both assure full security for Israel and 'enable the development of Gaza into a fully-fledged democracy, as part of the development of the Palestinian nation'.

How can the five million Palestinians who have known no home other than refugee camps not carry deep resentment towards Israelis now living in their ancestral family homes? Reimposition of Israeli overlordship over a puppet authoritarian regime in Gaza will deepen Palestinian hatred and resistance. Conversely, democratic re-enfranchisement could give meaning to autonomy and a direct stake in avoiding armed conflict with Israel in order to preserve the new status quo. Military action is necessary to build a path to peace but will

not be sufficient by itself; only a political solution built on foundations of justice for all parties can achieve that. Ending Gaza's occupation and investing in democracy are no more optional add-ons than are dismantling Hamas and protecting civilians.

The two-state solution increasingly appears to be a ['luxury belief'](#), allowing various 'leaders' to crown themselves with a halo by proclaiming undimmed fidelity to a concept that has been dead in the water for decades. As an Indian, I remember only too well the geographical absurdity of Pakistan split into two halves across its enemy India, until emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 as an independent country. Some postulate instead the creation of two [separate states in Gaza and the West Bank](#). During the transition period, the two states-to-be could be stabilised under a coalition administration comprising Israel, up to four Western countries, and Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain.

Israel will also come under pressure to lift the [land, sea and air blockade](#) of Gaza in force since 2007 with devastating humanitarian consequences for its 2.3 million people. This is why the UN describes Gaza as ['Occupied Palestinian Territory'](#). Otherwise, the narrative of Gaza as the world's biggest open-air prison will persist. The continual expansion of [Jewish settlements](#) in the West Bank must also come to an end. Accommodating internal tensions in domestic Israeli politics is exacting too high a price in foreign policy. Hopefully Israel can also resume the search for normalised relations with key Arab countries like Saudi Arabia.

Is international humanitarian assistance counter-productive in the long run? Ari Heistein and Nathaniel Rabkin note that, at best, overseas humanitarian aid allows Hamas to evade responsibility for civic affairs and the social welfare of Gaza's population, offloading that responsibility to the UN and NGOs. At worst, it is a financial [spigot](#) that is turned on by Hamas at opportune moments when its finances are running low by provoking retaliatory Israeli strikes that give them video feeds to mobilise international assistance, a de facto fundraising drive.

## **Immigration Policy**

Another set of tough questions the West avoids concerns the consequences of the failures of education, immigration and border control policies. Immigration policies guided by an optimistic faith in 'diversity' haven't helped to maintain a peaceful, pluralistic society of shared values. Antisemitism that has been normalised in substantial segments of Western communities has awakened deep-seated anxieties among Jews:

- Chants of 'Gas the Jews!', 'Jihad! Jihad! Jihad!' and 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' at mass rallies in several Western cities;
- Posters of missing Israeli children ripped off;
- Protestors and Black Lives Matter activists lionising paragliders who machine gunned the young Israelis at a music festival;
- London's police threatening people waving England's flag with arrest but issuing a disquisition on the many meanings of jihad.

The pro-Hamas demonstrations, nowhere more pregnant with historical resonance than in Berlin, should serve as a wake-up call. The centenarian Kissinger fled Nazi Germany aged

15. After the painful scenes in Berlin of mass celebrations of the Hamas attacks, he lamented: 'It was a [grave mistake](#) to let in so many people of totally different cultures and religions and concepts'. Western democracies continue to ignore the problem of big numbers of migrants who bring their inherited hatreds and conflicts to create major problems for their adopted countries, whose values they neither understand nor respect. They change the demographic balance and spawn diaspora-courting politicians who mute condemnation of terrorism for the sake of votes. The foreign policy damage of this is seen also in Canada-India tensions, as argued [here](#). In the wake of demonstrations that blur the line between pro-Palestine and antisemitic, a [Leger-Postmedia poll in Canada](#) has interesting pointers to public opinion that might well translate to other Western countries. PM Justin Trudeau is fond of saying 'diversity is our strength'. Not so fast, say most Canadians. Diversity can bring problems alongside benefits. Newcomers should embrace Canada's 'values and traditions' and discard cultural identity incompatible with that. Non-permanent residents who express hate towards minorities or support for terrorist groups should be deported. Canadians reject 2:1 the notion that 'certain minority groups should be given additional rights and privileges in accordance with notions of decolonisation, anti-racism and equity'.

Meanwhile in Europe anti-immigration parties have started moving from the fringes into the public square. Geert Wilders in the Netherlands is the latest example. If polls are to be believed, Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) party might be the next political earthquake in Europe. Current [polls](#) put its public support at 24 per cent. Riots in Dublin prove public anger at mass immigration is at boiling point. Turns out the far right may be morphing into the new deep centre. In response, Europeans have revived the debate over threats from the creation of 'parallel societies' when immigrant groups insulate themselves from host societies and import quarrels from their homelands.

## Conclusion

As demanded by many critics of Israel, this Policy Brief has looked at the events of and since 7 October 2023 'in context'. Even by the standards of the blood-stained history of the Middle East conflict, the current war has uniquely savage roots and sequel. The paper agrees with the Israeli claim that the destruction of the military threat posed by Hamas and the dismantling of the Hamas political structures are a necessary condition for re-establishing some sort of a peace in the Israel-Palestine conflict. It parts company with the Netanyahu agenda, however, in arguing that to move beyond yet another armed truce until the next incident that provokes yet another even more brutal round of fighting is unacceptable. The heaviest costs are paid by innocent civilians on both sides, but disproportionately so by Palestinians. Israelis too must rein in the ideological extremists in their midst who dehumanise and 'Other' all Palestinians. They must dismantle some settlements in occupied territory, and engage in good faith negotiations that will entail some painful sacrifices in order to create a substantial stake for Palestinians in preserving their own state rather than aiming to destroy the state of Israel.

## The Author

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