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## **Israel and Hamas at War: What Price Peace?**

*By Lawrence Anderson*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Six weeks after Hamas' surprise attack on 7 October, Israel has demolished much of Gaza City in the northern part of the Gaza Strip as well as substantial infrastructure elsewhere in the territory. Sustained military attacks has led to disproportionate casualties amongst civilian Palestinians and prompted urgent calls for a pause to the fighting. It does not appear either side can win but there is also no will to pursue peace via the two-state solution.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Initial sympathy for Israel arising from the vicious attacks by Hamas on 7 October has shifted decisively to criticism of it for perpetrating the mounting destruction of civilian infrastructure and deaths and suffering of Palestinians, especially children.

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution on 15 November calling for "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses" to provide Palestinian civilians some relief from incessant attacks by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A similar vote was passed at the UN General Assembly last month. Even the United States, Israel's staunchest ally, has urged restraint and called for a humanitarian pause to facilitate the release of hostages held by Hamas and for supplies of essential goods to enter Gaza. Faced with mounting international pressure, Israel's foreign minister has estimated that the IDF will have to cease its military operations within two to three weeks.

Most governments and commentators have expressed the view that the Israelis have the right to self-defence under the circumstances, particularly in view of the terrorist actions perpetrated by Hamas. But this does not absolve the IDF of the responsibility to observe international codes of humanitarian behaviour designed to protect innocent civilian population.

## **Prospects for Victory**

Israel cannot win militarily. Even if Hamas is destroyed, other Palestinian terrorist groups, such as Palestine Islamic Jihad, will take over. The Palestinian threat is an existential problem for Israel that will fester beyond the current war.

Hamas cannot win either. Although its popularity with Palestinians and Muslims all over the world has soared, it will not be allowed to rule Gaza. A post-war plan to replace it with the Palestinian National Authority is currently being brokered by the US, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, amongst others.

Hamas has delayed, but not derailed the emerging cooperation between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Gulf states see Iran's hand in the current outbreak. On the ground, Hamas has nominal support from Palestine Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and terrorist groups in Iraq. These are all Iranian proxies and opposed to the Gulf monarchies as well.

Once the current fighting ceases and after a decent interval, the Saudis will move on to recognise Israel. Before that, they will work towards securing concessions from Israel and security guarantees from the US, all of which will amount to a *de facto* alliance.

While there are no clear winners from the war, what is certain is that the losers are the two million Palestinians in Gaza.

## **Likelihood of a Regional War?**

The US has deployed formidable military assets, including two aircraft carrier groups and a nuclear submarine, to deter threats of a wider regional war. This has proven successful so far.

Hezbollah and Iran's other proxies have escalated their attacks on Israel from their respective strongholds, but with limited effect for now. Iran itself, bogged down with its own internal problems, will not want to be involved in a major war. But Iran will continue to use its proxies to foment regional instability.

The US remains the dominant player in the region, but it is not all-powerful. Washington will continue to provide financial and material support to Israel, but it will also try to curb Israel's military excesses besides focusing on getting the hostages released and a humanitarian pause implemented.

Although self-sufficient in its energy needs, the US will not allow Saudi oil reserves or Qatari natural gas deposits to fall into the hands of unfriendly governments such as Iran, Russia and Islamist groups. Consequently, Washington will not abandon its role as the security guarantor of its Gulf allies. What is of concern to the Saudis is whether this guarantee extends to the preservation of Al Saud rule. Hence, a Saudi understanding with Israel serves as an added insurance policy against Iran, as well as a source of much-needed technical and managerial expertise.

China's stock in the region has grown, given its economic clout and diplomatic foray

that capitalised on the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. China's interests in the region are primarily energy security and economic. Its leaders are astute enough to want good relations to remain with Saudi Arabia and its allies on one side, and Iran on the other. They have no desire to become embroiled in the region's intractable quarrels.

### **What price a permanent peace?**

A viable Palestinian state is now a pipe dream. The two-state solution which recognises Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state does not resolve a fundamental problem of geography, i.e., the Gaza Strip at one end and the West Bank on the other, with Israel in between through which a land bridge runs linking the two Palestinian entities. A unified Palestinian state would mean the *de facto* partition of Israel, which Israel will never accept. This leaves the current separation between Gaza and West Bank as the best-case reality.

For such a divided Palestinian state to be independent and to prosper, it must build on good relations with its powerful Israeli neighbour. Sadly, the latest spate of fighting will only reinforce the animosity, distrust and righteous indignation between Israelis and Palestinians. Both sides believe they are legally and morally right with God on their side, making prospects for lasting peace in the coming years highly unlikely.

The harsh reality is that neither Israel nor Palestine wants a two-state solution. Every Palestinian leader, whether it is Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority, or his successors, knows that any peace settlement will entail making compromises and accepting terms that will not fully satisfy the Palestinian people. Zionist extremists on the Israeli side would also be opposed to a two-state solution. Any Palestinian or Israeli leader who signs on to a two-state solution is likely to risk assassination by extremists.

### **Conclusion**

There is no possibility that Israel, the US and many of the Arab states will accept a return to Hamas rule in Gaza. Neither does Israel want to permanently occupy Gaza, which will remain a hotbed of terrorist violence, unless it can expel all the Palestinians.

The likely outcome after the fighting has ceased is the return of the Palestinian National Authority to Gaza, supported by a multi-national force with an Arab component. But it will be an almost impossible task for the Palestinian National Authority to demilitarise and deradicalise the Gaza Strip.

For now, the international community will continue to push for a two-state solution as the most acceptable diplomatic and political option to the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is no hope of another process to supersede the Oslo Peace Accords which delivered the two-state solution almost 30 years ago. At the same time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing partners in the present Israeli government will not condone a Palestinian state in God's promised land. Israeli objection to anyone else's proposal on the status of Jerusalem seems unshakeable. The prospects for progress on the two-state solution or other diplomatic initiatives are, at best, dim.

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