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Palestine: Israel's Existential Crisis and the Way Forward

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The geopolitical landscape in the Middle East is shifting in the aftermath of Hamas' bloody attacks on Israelis on October 7, 2023 and Israel's massive retaliatory measures in Gaza. The situation is akin to the consequences of the Yom Kippur war in 1973 when politico-military assumptions were broken and the status quo proved to be very unstable.

In recent years the Palestinian issue was portrayed by many within and outside of the Middle East as less relevant than it had been in the past. The principled position of peacemaking of the Arab-Israeli conflict—"Land for Peace" under the aegis of two key UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338—has been sidelined for "Peace for Peace" or "Economic Peace," as evidenced by the Abraham Accords and

subsequent efforts to normalize relations between Israel and Arab countries without fully addressing the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These approaches served the interests of those in Israel who did not want to engage in any peace negotiations with the Palestinians that entailed territorial compromises in the occupied West Bank. This is certainly the case for the current right-wing coalition government of Prime Minister Netanyahu which includes extreme ethno-nationalist and messianic members who believe that the biblical land of Israel (Judea and Samaria) should never be ceded in any peace agreement.

The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories is in its 56th year. Indeed, the prospect for a Two State Solution (TSS) whereby there would be an independent and sovereign Palestinian state living in peace and security next to the state of Israel has eroded each year with the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. These settlements are illegal under international law and the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Today, there is the argument that the reality resembles a “One State Solution” with unequal rights between the Israelis and Palestinians, which is a form of apartheid.

The Palestinian issue is an existential challenge to the state of Israel. If Israel wants to preserve its identity as a “Democratic Jewish State,” it must end the occupation through a negotiated TSS. There are approximately 7 million Israeli Jews and 7 million Palestinian Arabs between the Jordan River and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Neither one or the other is going anywhere else. Under a One State Solution Israel will lose either its Jewish identity because of the stronger demographic growth factors on the Palestinian side, or its democratic nature because of unequal rights between Arabs and Jews. Israel must decide whether it is to be the State of Israel or the State of Judea and Samaria. What the October 7th attack brought to the fore is that the Palestinian issue will not go away without continued bloodshed, wars, and regional instability giving rise to wider conflicts and enhancing the prospects of extremist groups resorting to terrorism.

No one can predict the evolution of the war in Gaza and whether or not it will expand regionally, but it will end and the question is what happens the day after. Israel’s policy of deterrence against Hamas has failed. There has also been an intelligence and military failure with Israel’s population in the south undefended. According to some Israeli media reports, IDF units were diverted to the West Bank to deal with the unrest and incidents caused mainly by the Israeli settlers there. Hamas must also have calculated in launching the October 7th attacks that the Israeli government was diverted by the anti-government demonstrations and major divisions in Israeli society. There was also the factor of the reported forward thrust of normalization between Arab states and Israel, especially Saudi Arabia, which was perceived to be against the Palestinian cause and the interests of Iran. In addition, there is the religious factor underlying Hamas’s identity as an Islamist party. Hamas called its October 7th attack the “Al Aqsa Flood.” Al Aqsa is the third holiest site in Islam and religious Israeli groups have

been pushing the limits of the status quo on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem where Al Aqsa is located, thereby raising Arab-Israeli tensions.

Under the doctrine of self-defense, Israel is determined to do everything possible to defeat Hamas in the wake of October 7th which resulted in the killing, wounding and hostage-taking of many of its citizens. The Israeli military operations in Gaza are taking a huge toll on the life and limb of the Palestinian population and have created a major humanitarian crisis. When this tragic situation has exhausted itself, the question arises what is the end game?

It would be a major mistake to return to anything resembling the status quo ante. 56 years of occupation have taken too much of a toll on Israelis and Arabs alike. When I was the United States ambassador to Israel in 1994 then Prime Minister Rabin told me there is no military solution to Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, only a political solution which he pursued valiantly at the cost of his life.

Whereas the Yom Kippur War in 1973 led to the Camp David Accords and peace treaty brokered by President Jimmy Carter in 1979 and with President Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Begin of Israel, there is a possibility that October 7th 2023 can be another catalyst to make peace.

To do so there would have to be elections for a new government in Israel and a national consensus to make peace with the Palestinians. There have been increasing calls for Prime Minister Netanyahu's resignation. There would also have to be a restructuring of the ossified Palestinian Authority and the PLO with elections to bring forward a credible leadership representing all the Palestinians that would be able to negotiate peace with Israel. There will also have to be strong political determination and demonstrable leadership in the region and in major capitals, especially in Washington, to help broker a peace agreement.

It is critical that a political horizon or framework of principles be outlined that provides a pathway toward a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such frameworks have been presented in the past and would enhance the success of peacemaking with Terms of Reference for an acceptable end state for both parties.

These are high barriers to overcome but they are not insurmountable. It has been accomplished in the past with the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the Madrid Peace Conference, and the subsequent peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. To do otherwise is to relegate the people of the region to continued bloodshed, suffering, and the loss of hope which will result in regional instability, extremism, and terrorism. Indeed, peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will

undercut the geopolitical threat of Iran and its regional proxies, such as Hezbollah and other extremist groups that exploit the Palestinian issue for their own political ends.

What is required to address this critical challenge is a renewed sense of strategic direction. Leadership, competence and strong political will on all sides must be demonstrated to address the core issues of this conflict and to make peace. The stakes are too high to do less.

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