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# Learning from the Past in the Israeli-Hamas Negotiations

There is much talk now about Israeli-Hamas negotiations, as the bloody war slogs its way towards a stalemate. This is not the time to negotiate a Middle East solution, beyond a ceasefire that may not be agreed until the two sides are both exhausted. At that point, however, there is an opportunity for real progress, recalling De Gaulle in 1962 (France-Algeria), De Klerk in 1990 (South African apartheid) and even Kissinger in 1974 (Arab-Israeli Dispute), in which careful, patient diplomacy could develop if we begin to think about it now. It is the only chance for real peace we will have.

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The 7 October terrorist attacks were an outburst of desperation in a struggle to achieve an unattainable goal. There is a good chance that Hamas, even if acting with some degree of autonomy, was partly influenced by Iran to disrupt the Abraham Accords, which have been making progress. However, Hamas could no more eliminate Israel than Israel can eliminate Palestinian nationalism. Therein lies the tragic stalemate that should by all logic open a process to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is now deep pain on both sides, as there was in the 1973 October war that produced the process leading to the Washington agreement between Israel and Egypt, now nearly half a century old and still standing, however shakily.

The next move was Israel's reaction to Hamas, and Israel could do no less – its public would not allow it – despite international and even domestic pressure to contain the reaction and not produce “an eye for an eye, casualties for casualties”. (There is a similar mantra in the Qur'an [5:45], but with an escape clause.) There are two parts to Hamas – the military organisation and the nationalist cause. Israel will not eliminate either. At most, it can weaken Hamas militarily, but the tunnels are still there and young Gazans are moving in to join the fight. Also, there are other groups such as Islamic

Jihad, Lions' Den and Islamic State to pick up the dropped weapons. Hamas's cause is galvanising, and since its members do not wear sparkling green shirts, many slip through the Israeli intelligence net, such as it is. Hamas's tactic has always been to use human shields, and civilians are indistinguishable from Hamas members. Palestinian nationalism, of which Hamas is product, can no more be eliminated than was Armenian nationalism by the Turkish genocide or Kosovar nationalism by the Serbian pogroms. In both cases, the result was a bitter conflict and then the creation of a nation state for at least part of the affected population.

If there is a second front in the north, the result will be similar – a repeat of the 2006 Israeli raid on southern Lebanon, which also missed a few Hezbollah members and brought the party into government in Lebanon. The more thorough these reactions are, the more they are likely to diminish support for Israel, as casualties – particularly civilian casualties – pile up on the other sides. An attack against Hezbollah-governed Lebanon will bring war closer to Syria, now indirectly run by Russia, even though both countries are currently busy with their own conflicts.

The current US policy stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict is to achieve stability, and then peace, which is like hopping from Mount Everest to Mount McKinley without mention of the lower levels in between. It should not be surprising if, when it's all over (if that phrase has any meaning), we will simply be back in a worsened status quo ante,

promoted by the inadequacy of this policy and its assumptions. Current US policy appears to be standard under the current US administration: telling the parties to cool it and pursuing, in Secretary Blinken's words, "our policy priority to protect US citizens". This seems to miss the fact that, behind the recovery of hostages (many of whom are already dead), is the broader need to protect US citizens through alert intelligence gathering and an active diplomacy that defends and promotes US interests and security throughout the region.

Some will say it takes a shock to achieve such an outcome, and then fatigue, and then a conservative leader such as Eisenhower in Korea or Nixon in Vietnam (although these are not helpful examples because in both cases the conservative party faced a revolutionary state, not just a multiheaded movement). But there are better parallels – De Gaulle in 1962 facing the ALN and FLN in Algeria, F.W. de Klerk in 1990 facing the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe in South Africa, and to some extent Kissinger (later Carter) beginning in 1974 in the Israel-Egypt confrontation – where a national liberation movement (or an enemy state in the third case) by its uprising, although defeated militarily, shook the determination of the occupying power and its strong conservative leader to the point of negotiating an agreement to end the war.

The parallels are enlightening and hopeful, but they carry some necessary conditions. In the first two cases, there were leaders on each side who were willing to negotiate and who did indeed see the conflict to be in a mutually hurting stalemate, and there was no mediator. In the third case there was a skilled mediator who convinced Golda Meir (Sadat was already convinced) that the moment was ripe for a settlement.

But leaders such as these are not present now. Netanyahu is losing support while facing an upcoming election, while the Hamas leadership face no elections and Mahmoud Abbas has only weak support. Here is the real challenge: a leadership change without the mechanism for it, and although Netanyahu is doubtless on his way out according to the polls, there is still the job of converting the Israeli public to the possibility of making peace with the perpetrators of the 7 October attacks. Yet many Gazans are repelled by the war that Hamas has brought to their homes and families. Thirty years ago it was said, "Oslo killed Rabin and Hamas elected Netanyahu", and now we must recognise that "Israel brought in Hamas, and

Hamas brought in Israel". There is an opportunity to cultivate the Palestinians who hate Israel, but it will take extremely careful diplomacy and leadership to do so. Similar diplomacy and leadership would be needed to cope with Israeli public opinion after the horrors of the 7 October attacks and decades of Palestinian terrorism, for even if an Israeli leader were to be elected who is ready to agree to a Palestinian neighbour led by those currently in charge of the occupied Palestinian territories, it would be seen by many Israelis as a formula for their country's ultimate defeat. It will take nothing less than a manifestation of a higher degree of negotiating skills among all stakeholders than have thus far been apparent.

But it will take nothing less. Without a dramatic awakening on both sides, the [ceasefire of Biden, Blinken and Haass](#) will produce a return to a stalemate that will prove to be more frustrating than ever, and will provide more opportunities for external intruders and their proxies to fish in the troubled sands of the Middle East. It took five years and skilful bipartisan leadership and diplomacy for the October 1973 war to produce the Washington agreement. Are we up to doing the same for the current crisis?

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