

John Strawson

The Weight of history after October 7 and the Gaza War: Shaping a New Future

Abstract: The trauma of the October 7 massacre for Israelis and catastrophe that Gazans have experience in the subsequent war mark a new stage in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While October 7 and indeed the Israeli response are exceptional, we cannot overcome their consequences without addressing the root of the conflict. Calls for an immediate ceasefire are understandable but fall into the trap of seeing the solution as being a military decision. This echoes to the attitude of the current Israeli government which poses the response to October 7 as a military one. However, without breaking from the trope seeing the conflict in terms of military winners and losers we will neither end the current war or deal with the roots of the conflict. A new international political initiative is required to change the atmosphere by setting the goal of resolving the conflict on the basis of self-determination for both Israelis and Palestinians. That needs to inform the approach we adopt to ending the current conflict by replacing Hamas and Israel in Gaza with an international security mechanism.

Keywords: Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, October 7, Gaza, Occupation, Two-States, Security

A massacre and a war have become a defining moment in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The impact of October 7 and the Gaza war is shaping not just the contemporary Middle East but also international relations. It even reaches into domestic politics as can be seen in the United States, several European countries, and South Africa. It has occupied much attention at the United Nations. It has been the main news story in much of the international media. On October 7 thousands of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants crossed from Gaza into Israel to massacre, torture and rape Israelis. In addition, 245 people were taken hostage. At least 1,200 people mostly civilians died that day. The communities from which they came mostly small Kibbutzim were left in smoldering ruins. At the Supernova music festival some 360 mostly young people were slaughtered and many women were raped. This massacre, Ghazi Hamad a leading member of Hamas, promised was to first of many which would continue until Israel

was ‘annihilated.’ (Hamad 2023). In the ensuing war some 34,000 Palestinians have lost their lives and much of Gaza has been destroyed.¹ The Palestinian Israeli conflict has never appeared more stark, vicious, and dangerous.

The Israeli response to October 7 has been an increasingly long war with devastating consequences. This article will not deal with the justifications for the war but rather will consider the issues that need to be addressed to end it. It argues that wars and conflicts do not end unless there is a sustainable peace plan. Without that the conditions that gave rise to the violence are almost certain to re-occur.

Internationally much attention has focused on the idea of an immediate cessation of hostilities. In march the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2728 (2024) which called in rather general terms for a ceasefire during Ramadan, the return of Israeli hostages and suppling more civilian humanitarian aid. At the same time in various venues, Doha, Cairo, and Paris talks have been held to attempt to arrive at a similar formula. Despite a short ceasefire in November 2023, creating the basis for implementing the UN aims have not been successful. At root this is due the way in which the historical character of the conflict necessarily becomes interwoven with the causes of the current violence. October 7 was in some ways an exceptional event, but it has underlined the existential character of the conflict. As sustainable ceasefire will only be possible if it acknowledges both the specific character of October 7 and the underlying conflict. In other words, such negotiations will need to produce not merely the absence of violence but a route towards a secure future.

¹ These figures are from the Hamas controlled Ministry of Health and do not distinguish between civilian and military casualties.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister's stated war aim is the total defeat of Hamas (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). These aims are posed in military terms. A post-war Gaza in this account is to be under Israeli military control with unspecified non-Hamas figures running a civil administration. For most of the period since 1949 Gaza has been under direct military occupation. Neither the Egyptian period 1949-1967 nor the Israeli since 1967 has brought peace or security. The narrow focus on military action merely reinforces the very factors that have given rise to the current violence in the first place. I will argue that without a political vision to change the terms of the conflict, all the end of the war will bring is another respite until the next outbreak of violence. Hamas have made their intentions clear. The ideas and program that the movement subscribes to will not be defeated by military means alone. Without a return to politics, we are merely left with the cycle of violence.

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The UN Partition Plan

In 1947 the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 181 (11) which partitioned British Mandate Palestine into two states within an economic union. The proposed Jewish and Arab states would both have minorities, and no one would have to move from their home. Jerusalem and Bethlehem would be under United Nations control. The Jewish leadership accepted the plan, but the Palestinian leadership and the Arab world rejected it. The latter launched an insurgency in Palestine and then, with some British support, a full-scale war in May 1948 to prevent the implementation of the plan. This is not the place to evaluate the issues at stake but the rather to reflect on the results of this critical moment.

As I have written,

The events of 1948 were to imprint themselves on the narratives of Palestinians and Israelis. For the Palestinians the *nakba* was central to forging the discourse of dispossession; for Israelis 1948 was the moment of national liberation. The tropes of homelessness and return were to be reversed; exiled Jews had returned home, Palestinians had been exiled [...] These discourses thus developed mutually exclusive elements: Jewish survival was linked to Palestinian defeat while restoration of Palestine required to the removal of the Jews. Both peoples thus sought survival in the destruction of the other (Strawson 2010, 152).

The years 1947-1949 have shaped the Palestinian-Israeli ever since. During the insurgency from 1946 and then in the international war after May 1948, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced from their homes. There were several incidents of massacres and forced displacement by armed forces of both sides (Morris 1987). When the Armistice lines were drawn in 1949 no Jews were left in the areas occupied by Jordan and Egypt and in all some 700,000 Palestinians were turned into refugees. The West Bank and east Jerusalem were in Jordanian hands and what we now know as the Gaza Strip was under the Egyptians. Both these areas had been included in the projected Arab state under the UN plan. However, neither Jordan or Egypt allowed Palestinians to govern these territories and create a Palestinian state. Instead, Jordan annexed the West Bank to the Kingdom of Jordan, making east Jerusalem one of its two capitals. It was to ruthlessly suppress all signs of Palestinian nationalism. Palestinian political and professional organizations – such as the Bar – were merged with the Jordanian equivalent (Tal 2004).

In Gaza the Egyptians briefly allowed Amin Al Husseini to create his 'All Palestine Government' and to issue passports (Shlaim 1990). However, within two weeks the Egyptians transferred the Palestinian ministers to Cairo, where they remained. The Jordanians denounced the Mufti's government and prevented it from operating in its territory. As result these two parts of Palestine were governed differently, the West Bank as part of Jordan and Gaza as an occupied territory.

For 19 years after the 1948 the two areas of Palestine this evolved in quite different ways. The West Bank's integration into the Hashemite Kingdom meant a new legal, administrative, and political system which replaced that of the British Mandate. Many Palestinians from the West Bank were to become politicians, civil servants, academics, and judges. While Palestinian nationalist sentiments were repressed, the civil rights of Palestinians were respected. The Palestinian population of the Jordan included of the citizens of the West bank, including East Jerusalem and as well as 350,000 refugees from other parts of Mandate Palestine (Gelber 2006).

Constituting Gaza

In Gaza the situation was quite different. The Egyptians ran the strip as an occupied territory under international law. This meant that for the most part British Mandate law continued to exist. However, the population of Gaza had been transformed by the war. At the outbreak of the conflict in November 1947 the population of Gaza was some 141,000. However, as a consequence of the war some 40% of the population left, mostly for Egypt. Most estimates put the resident population of Gaza by the summer of 1948 at 85,000. However, by the end of 1948 this population had been swelled by the arrival of nearly 200,000 Palestinians displaced from the areas that were now under Israeli control. As a result, the constitution of what

became known as the Gaza Strip was demographically very different to the area before 1948 with a majority of the population composed of Palestinian refugees.

From 1949 the while overall control was exercised by Egypt, it was to be UNWRA² created by the United Nations General Assembly that was to become central to the daily lives of most of Gaza's population. At first it provided basic assistance, but it gradually grew effectively into a welfare state providing schools, health services and other social services. In time it saw the replacement of tents with permanent buildings which over the decade evolved in towns and cities. UNWRA became a central part of the administration.

Gaza under Egyptian control from 1949 was a very different place to what it had been under the Mandate. As we have seen demographically the area had been transformed. The new population was predominantly Palestinian refugees – with over 70% being in that category. It needs to be stressed that the definition of a Palestinian refugee is very particular as 'persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict' (UNWRA). In the case of Gaza, the new population had little connection with the area but with other towns, cities, and villages within what had become the State of Israel. The inhabitants did not think of themselves as Gazans and mostly imagined that the Gaza would be a temporary haven until they could return to their homes. As a consequence, the cultural environment was dominated by displacement. In the decades since new generations have been born and raised within the Gaza Strip although with a consciousness of their origins. This consciousness has been nourished by families and clans and within the school system

² The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East

run by UNWRA. This refugee consciousness has imprinted itself on the politics of the area as well.

Gaza itself is essentially an oasis that takes its name from Gaza city (Filiu 2014). Until 1917 it was administered as part of the Ottoman Empire. The British during the First World War scored a major victory over the Ottomans in Gaza which opened the way for a British advance in the whole of the Levant which culminated with the surrender of October 1918. The British were not initially interested in running Gaza and hoped that the Egyptians would take it over. When that offer was refused the British incorporated it into the territory that was to become the British Mandate for Palestine in 1922. In the meantime, it was run first by a military government and then by a civil administration until the Mandate came into force in 1923. The population of Gaza city which had been over 40,000 in 1914 had declined to 17,000 by the time of the 1922 British census. The intense fighting over Gaza city was the cause of this dramatic change. It underlines the fact that war has marked this area for well over a hundred years. In a very real sense, the Gaza strip has been a region that be made and remade over this period.

During the British Mandate it was a run as district with the neighboring area of Beersheba. This continued until 1948 when the armistice lines between Israel and the Arab forces were agreed (Morris 2006: 376-379). It was at that point that the boundaries of the contemporary Gaza Strip were defined. The lines on the map merely signified where each side had ended the war and in no way constituted a natural community. This is, however, not an uncommon manner in which international boundaries arise.

In establishing the political and administrative system in Gaza a major consideration for the Egyptian government was the role that should be given the Palestinian leader Mufti Al Hussein. His “All Palestine government” declared in September 1948 had been recognized by all Arab states with the exception of Jordan which banned his supporters from organizing in the country. The Egyptians were equivocal over the role of Mufti for several reasons. He was a mercurial figure who had sided with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. From the mid-1930’s the Nazi regime had assiduously wooed Arab nationalist movements (Kuntzel, 2023). During the war an aspect of Germany strategy was to encourage Arab nationalist and the Muslim world in general to rise up against British and French colonialism. (Motadel 2014) The Mufti played his part and in 1941 was involved in the rising against the pro-British government of Iraq. When that failed Al Hussein escaped to Italy and then made his way to Berlin for an infamous meeting with Hitler. He then became active in Arab broadcasts on Nazi radio stations beamed towards the Middle East and North Africa. His activities included several interventions to prevent Jews from fleeing Nazi controlled areas and recruiting Muslims to the Bosnian SS.

From a strategic level, the 1948 war has been fought ostensibly in the interests of Palestinian nationalism and against the UN partition plan. However, as John Glubb, the British commander in chief of the Jordanian Arab Legion explained in his memoirs, Jordan had in mind a partition plan of different type. Jordan would take the West Bank; the Galilee would have been transferred to Lebanon and Egypt would have taken the Gaza-Beersheba district (Glubb 1957: 59). What Egypt thought of such a plan is unclear. What it underlines is the uncertain character of Arab politics at the time. The Egyptian assumption probably was the occupation would be short-term affair until the military reversal of the results of the 1948

war. . In the event the Egyptians became the long-term custodian of the Strip with its large refugee population.

In 1952 the pro-British regime in Egypt was overthrown and a new radical regime committed to Arab national unity was established. This was to transform the politics of the Middle East, especially once the charismatic Abdul Gamal Nasser emerged as the main leader of the revolution (Crabbs 1975). In the 1950's Nasserism was to spread through the region which saw the replacement of pro-Western regimes which displaced Britain and France in the region to the benefit of the Soviet Union.

While the new Egyptian government promoted radical rhetoric about liberating Palestine, in practice it was rather more cautious. Palestinian militants from the Gaza strip regularly breached the border to carry out attacks in Israel. As a result, in 1954 the Egyptian government considered a US-UNWRA proposal to re-locate the Gazan Palestinian refugees in the Egyptian Sinai. The Egyptians thought that such a move would help reduce a military tension between Israel and Egypt. As soon as the plan was made public days of protest broke out in Gaza and Nasser abandoned its implementation (Masalha 1996: 56).

In 1956 President Gamal Nasser's government nationalized the British-French owned Suez Canal. The British and French choreographed a response in conjunction with Israel. Since 1949 Israel had been experiencing episodic attacks from militant groups in Gaza. In responding to these attacks Israel would attack Egypt which would create the pretext for Britain and France to intervene to stop the conflict and at same time resume control of the Suez Canal (Charlwood 2019). During the Israeli military campaign Gaza and the Sinai were captured by Israel. Gaza was occupied by Israel for 5 months. In 1957 the Israelis withdrew.

The United Nations created a peace-keeping force between Israel and Egypt along the Sinai border. Egypt demanded its withdrawal in the summer of 1967.

The 1967 War: Victory and Occupation.

The sweeping Israeli victory in the 1967 Six Day War (Oren 2002) saw Gaza transferred from Egyptian occupation to Israeli for the second time. Gaza was part a vast swath of the Middle East that fell under Israeli military control which stretched from the Suez Canal and Sharm El Sheikh through the West Bank to the Syrian Golan Heights. As with the results of the 1948 war there was a sense after June 1967 that victory for one side meant a humiliating defeat for the other. This was to be reflected in both Israeli and Arab politics.

At the time the Arab League rejected any deal with Israel. The Khartoum Summit adopted the ‘three Noes,’- no to recognition of Israel, no to negotiations with Israel and no to peace with Israel. Despite the efforts of the United States to change the atmosphere, Arab intransigence meant that Israel had little incentive to do anything other than rely on the strategic depth which the territorial gains created. The Israeli government reveled in the victory but seemed to have no strategy of how to use it politically.

After the 1967 war political turmoil broke it in the Arab world. The decisive defeat of strong Arab states, particularly Egypt, which was supplied with sophisticated Soviet weapons, seemed inexplicable. President Nasser had become by this time a leader of the Arab World and a key figure in the Non-Aligned Movement. His secular Arab nationalism and reliance on the communist Soviet Union was seen in some Islamic circles as not only a weakness but as the reason for the defeat. According to this view the aim of the war which had been the defeat and indeed elimination of the State of Israel had ended in disaster because of the reliance on

materialism by leaders who had strayed from Islam. The solution was to turn to politics based on Islam. The Middle East was to see a revival of Islamic politics and the decline of secularism. The latter had dominated the region from the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Muslim Brotherhood which had been established in Egypt in 1928 (Mitchell 1993) was to become central in this process. It was an international organization and had a long involvement in Palestine. It had sent its members to fight in the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 which aimed to stop Jewish immigration to Palestine and to roll back any attempts to create a Jewish national home (Kuntzel 2023). The revolt was defeated but the Muslim Brotherhood had demonstrated its commitment to freeing Palestine through Jihad.³

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were active in the militias which were operating in Palestine from 1946. The Arab League established a military committee in 1947 to attempt to coordinate insurgent operations. One of the militias was the Holy War Army under the command of the Mufti which retreated to Gaza as the 1948 war drew to a close. This connection between the Muslim Brotherhood and military operations in Palestine was to become an enduring aspect of the historical consciousness of Palestinian politics. The Muslim Brotherhood's Syrian organization covered both Palestine and Syria until 1966. Then the decision was taken to create a Palestinian branch. In 1987 Hamas – the Islamic Resistance Movement – was born at the outset of the First Intifada (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010).

³ Jihad is a much-debated term, and the Prophet Mohammad divided the term into the greater and lesser Jihad. The greater Jihad was the struggle to become a good Muslim while the lesser Jihad was a military operation. A third meaning was to be developed by social activists who see Jihad as the struggle for a just society. In this article I am using Jihad in terms of the military doctrine of Islam. This has been elaborated in a specific branch of Islamic jurisprudence, known as al-Siyar – see (Khadduri 1966). Many, including myself have argued that Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood project military actions which are not in conformity with the Islamic Jurisprudence

The Islamist movement in Palestine had been quiescent during the first two decades of the occupation. It had focused on educational and social work. It had criticized the Palestinian Liberation Organization for its adventurist military and terrorist activity for bringing more repression on the Palestinian people. However, in the late 1980's Islamist politics had undergone a major change spurred in part by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This in turn had led to the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon which carried out attacks against the Israeli forces operating in Lebanon (after the 1982 invasion) and other Western targets which it saw as supportive of Israel. Its suicide attack on the US base in Beirut in 1983 had left 241 dead. This brought suicide bombing as a major tactic to the Middle East. During the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) other tactics such as hostage taking became common. These practices were to spread from Shi'a to Sunni political Islamic groups such as Hamas.

In Israel there was little questioning about how to deal with the new strategic situation other than a belief that it was through the force of arms that had seen Israel become a major military factor in the region. This error was exposed by the 1973 War when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israeli positions in the Sinai and the Golan Heights (Rabinovich 2005). While Israel was able to win the war itself it had damaged the *elan* felt after June 1967. However, the Egyptian government now led by Anwar Sadat was able to project the early gains in the October war as recompense for the crushing defeat of 1967. It provided the background to Sadat's dramatic initiative towards negotiations with Israel in November 1977, when he flew to Israel to address the Knesset. Within two years the Camp David agreement produced an agreement for an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and diplomatic relations between the two countries. The agreement contained a protocol on the occupied Palestinian territories which proposed the creation of Palestinian self-rule. The rest of the Arab world including the PLO denounced the agreement and the Palestinian provisions

were never implemented. However, some of the ideas contained in it were to form elements of the Oslo Agreements.

After 1967 Israel had adopted an ambivalent position to the former Mandate areas it had occupied. The territories as bargaining chips, in an effort to gain recognition from its Arab neighbors while at the same they were valued as containing sites that were significant in Jewish history. The government was torn between different political pressures. Those who sought to use the territories to negotiate an end to the conflict and those who saw the territories as a prize of victory. The Palestinian protocol in the Camp David agreement has been rejected by the PLO and by the Arab League – which expelled Egypt for its recognition of Israel. In these circumstances the Israeli government of Menachem Begin viewed these provisions as inoperative and continued to administrate the Palestinian territories as before. This allowed the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza to grow significantly.

Settlements on a small scale had begun soon after June 1967 (Zertal and Eldar 2007). Initially this was the result of religious Zionist movements which focused on particular areas of the West Bank. The government at first adopted no policy on the issue and found the attempts of Israelis to set up homes in the territories as an irritation to the smooth running of the administration. As a result, the settler movement began to emphasize the security advantages of settlements. In reality there were none as the settlers over time were to require protection by the IDF which extended the lines of communication making the security situation more precarious. The Gaza settlements were mostly established in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Many had begun as military outposts of the Nahal⁴ organization and then turned over to

⁴ Nahal was a paramilitary organization that combined military service with the creation of mainly agricultural settlements. Its later function ceased in 1990.

civilians. One settlement, Kfar Doron, was based on the site of a small Jewish community that had been founded in 1930 and abandoned when the Egyptian forces took the Gaza strip in 1948. The overwhelming majority of the 8,000 settlers were religious. Some the early settlers arrived in Gaza having been forcibly removed by Israel from the Yamit settlement in the Egyptian occupied Sinai.

The First Intifada and the formation of Hamas

The First Intifada saw a synchronized uprising by Palestinians against the occupation. Firearms were not used, and the main weapon was the throwing of stones at Israeli soldiers and bases. Hamas initiated and coordinated the uprising through creating a system of committees and communicating through the issuing of leaflets. One of the first was what became known as the Hamas Charter which spelt out the Islamist politics of the group and making it clear that aim was the destruction of Israel. The intifada was not merely a challenge to the Israelis but also to the secular PLO whose leadership were in exile in Tunis. The PLO which had been created in 1964 was very much part of the secular Arab nationalist movement. Until 1991 and the invasion of Kuwait it was backed financially by Saudi Arabia and diplomatically by the Soviet Union. So, it was a shock in the late 1980's to be confronted with an uprising that was not under its control. Over time the PLO and its component political parties in particular Fatah inserted themselves into the leadership of the intifada, especially in the West Bank.

When the intifada broke out the PLO's long held position was that Israel had to be eliminated and replaced with the secular democratic state. Its policy of whether and how many Jews could remain in this projected state changed over time. However, in 1988 an intense political

struggle within the organization between purist and pragmatic factions resulted in a victory for the latter at the Algiers conference, which adopted a Declaration of Independence that provided for the creation of a Palestinian state on any area of liberated Palestine. This was taken to mean a cautious step towards a two-state solution.

Indeed, it was the intifada that underlined the difference between Israel and the occupied territories and in particular the political and cultural distinction between the Palestinian minority in Israel and the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza. To some extent the collective political experience of the uprising consolidated a new Palestinian identity within the occupied territories.

The Israeli government found controlling let alone ending the intifada very difficult.

However, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the political turmoil in the Soviet Union were to create a very different international context for relations between Palestinians and Israelis.

The PLO made a strategic error in supporting Saddam Hussein's invasion which resulted in the end of funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. In the wake of the UN backed victory in the Kuwait crisis the USA and the USSR cosponsored a peace conference between Israel and its Arab neighbors in Madrid. Where the Palestinians were represented in a joint delegation with Jordan. For the first time since 1949 Israel and the three states were talking to each other officially despite the absence of diplomatic ties. In October 1991 the Soviet Union resumed diplomatic relations with Israel which further weakened the PLO's diplomatic position. The First Intifada continued during this period, which has a significant impact on Israeli politics. In 1992 Yitzhak Rabin the Labor leader led the party into the elections with a pledge to resolve the Palestinian issue within a year. Labor triumphed at the elections was able to form

a coalition government. It approved secret negotiations in Norway with the PLO that resulted in the Oslo agreements.

The Oslo Agreements

In the 1993, 1994 and 1995 Oslo agreements Gaza was to occupy a significant place. As the negotiations became more concrete a Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO was drafted (Watson 2000). It offered a framework for negotiations between both parties and a timescale in which they would take place. It was based on agreement with UNSC resolution 242 (1967) which had provided for secure border for all Middle East states and an Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories. The text of the declaration set out the aims of the process. The parties

agree that the time has come to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict, recognize their mutual legitimate and political rights, and strive to live in peaceful co-existence and mutual dignity and security and achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and historic reconciliation through the agreed political process. (Declaration of Principles, 1993).

These rather general formulations needed some to be secured with some confidence building steps. The Israeli side proposed the ‘Gaza first’ option under which Israeli would withdraw from Gaza to demonstrate commitment to the principles which would also change the situation on the ground. Since 1967 Israeli governments had different approaches to Gaza. Some proposed annexation and it’s integration into Israel. Now there was a different proposal. However, the establishment of Israeli settlements in Gaza necessarily complicated the plan, especially as in the timetable for talks settlements were amongst those issues to be agreed in the last phase. The settlements and Israeli military installations covered 32% of the area and so the withdrawal only covered the rest. In the event the Palestinian negotiators

insisted on a similar withdraw from the city of Jericho in the West Bank. This was implemented by the Cairo Agreement in May 1994. The agreement was the result of detailed negotiations over the exact areas of withdraw including the exact materials to be used in constructing the border posts.

Israel duly withdrew its forces from 68% of Gaza. In the summer of 1994, the exiled leader of the PLO Yasser Arafat set up the headquarters of the newly created Palestinian Authority in Gaza city. Many leaders of the PLO accompanied him together with members of the Palestinian National Army who were to form the backbone of the police force. When I visited Gaza a year later Arafat had succeeded in creating the infrastructure for a Palestinian government. New ministry buildings had been opened and good roads connected them. Gaza had become the seat of the first Palestinian administration in history. In December 1995 Israel redeployed its troops from the main West Bank cities and in January 1996 the first Palestinian elections took place. As a result of the new dispensation the seat of government moved over time to Ramallah on the West Bank. I recount this development as it demonstrates that way that Gaza has too often been seen as a staging post.

The Oslo process began to unravel with the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister in June 1996. He sought to 'lower Palestinian expectations' and his three years in office saw the undermining of the confidence building aspect of Oslo (Strawson 1998). The conclusion of the process was to be a permanent status agreement that had been due to be negotiated by May 4, 1999. However, the deadline passed. Shortly afterwards Netanyahu lost the next election to Labor's Ehud Barak. Unfortunately, instead of returning to serious negotiations with Arafat he chose instead to pursue a peace deal with Syria. When that failed very belatedly, he and Arafat met in the ill-fated Camp David talks in August 2000. There are

many views on who was responsible for their failure (Ross 2004) but a month later the Second Intifada broke out. Unlike the First Intifada this was to see military clashes between the IDF and the Palestinians – the Palestinian police, Fatah Militias and Hamas. The failure to address ‘mutual legitimate and political rights’ was disastrous.

The Palestinian Authority did manage to survive this period. International pressure was applied to both sides to return to negotiations. However, September 11, 2001, was to change the international context. The Al Qa’ida attack on the United States was to turn international terrorism into the central concern of world politics. After 2002 the Second intifada declined in intensity. But the focus of attention was to turn to Iraq as the US and Britain began to convince themselves that the Iraqi regime long not compliant with UNSC mandatory resolutions was an increasing threat to international peace and security. In March 2003 the US and its allies struck Iraq.

During this period the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon persuaded the US Administration that Yasser Arafat was an obstacle to peace and that the Palestinian Authority needed both security and political reform. The latter took the form of an international demand that the Palestinian political system created the post of an empowered Prime Minister. In March 2003 Mahmoud Abbas took office as Prime Minister. This created tensions within the PLO and especially between President Yasser Arafat and Abbas over the demarcations between the two roles. However, it was to prove a fateful policy of the US. In 2006 when the next Legislative Council elections took place, the Hamas alliance, Reform and Change won the elections and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh became Prime Minister. The period between 2003 and 2007 were tumultuous times in Palestinian politics. At the end of 2004 Yasser Arafat died and was replaced with Mahmoud Abbas.

In 2005 the Israeli government implemented its Gaza disengagement plan which saw the uprooting of the Israeli settlers and the removal of Israeli military forces and bases. This policy was unilateral, and no negotiations took place between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. It allowed Hamas to claim that it was its armed action that had forced the Israeli withdrawal. As a result, Hamas was able to claim new credibility when the 2006 elections took place. It based its campaign on its ability to combine its militant resistance to the occupation with a commitment provide clean government in contrast to the widespread corruption of the Fatah administration. The Hamas led-alliance, Reform and Change, won a majority of seats in the Legislative Council and thus its candidate became the empowered Prime Minister.

Like Abbas before him Haniyeh found that being Prime Minister involved a struggle with the President over the exercise of power. This in particular focused on the security forces, which Abbas kept an iron grip on. This developed into open warfare with Hamas losing in the West Bank but winning in Gaza. The Hamas ministers fled to Gaza with most Fatah based officials in Gaza going in the opposite direction. The result was a divided Palestinian polity.

Two Palestinian administrations have divided and weakened the Palestinians but did not bring Israel peace either.

Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza to prevent military materiel entering Gaza. It needs to be remembered that Israel does not control the land border with Egypt at Rafah. While the Egyptian authorities have generally been cautious about Gaza especially as militant Islamist activity in the adjoining Northern Sinai became a serious security threat. The blockade, as had become evident since October 7, was quite ineffective in its aims. Hamas was able to

able to acquire missile systems that have the ability to reach central Israel while also gaining sufficient building materials to build hundreds of miles of tunnels under the strip. As is evident Hamas was able to build a formidable well equipped military force. Despite the three serious conflicts between Hamas and Israel it seems that it has been able to maintain its military capabilities. This was undoubtedly aided by the government of Benjamin Netanyahu agreeing to the transfer of \$1.5 billion to them from Qatar. The Israelis in this were acting under the impression that Hamas did not have a medium-term plan to attack Israel and that in fact it wanted to focus on governing Gaza effectively. The failures of the intelligence on which such an assessment was made was quite stunning. The Israeli Prime Minister also adopted an erroneous political strategy of divide and rule –to play Gaza’s Hamas off against Fatah’s West Bank believing that this would undermine steps towards a Palestinian state. Both the intelligence failure and the politics have proved to be lethal to both Israelis and Palestinians.

After October 7

The tracks of the history of the past eight decades show that the focus on military action does not bring a lasting resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There has been a tendency of each side to think that the next war will be decisive. The sweeping victories and crushing defeats have if anything reinforced this belief. The current conflict between Israel and Hamas is very much in this mold. Hamas set out to demonstrate that its violence on October 7 would provoke a general war that would end in Israel’s annihilation. The Israeli response has been to aim to destroy Hamas by military means. The consequences of such military action against an opponent that bases itself amongst civilians and uses civilian sites to launch military attacks means that much of the fighting that has taken place has caused significant civilian

casualties and the massive destruction of civilian infrastructure. For almost all the past six months negotiations have been taking place through intermediaries. These are extraordinarily difficult to conduct as the ultimate parties to them seek the destruction of each other. Israel is committed to destroying Hamas while Hamas has made it clear it want to annihilate Israel, Creating the basis for even short-term agreements is problematic.

Hamas is not however the only Palestinian actor in the conflict. Perhaps the most positive and permanent result of the Oslo process has been the willingness of each side to recognize each other as Israelis and Palestinians. For most of the period before 1993 Palestinians and Israelis refused even to refer to each other by those names. This may seem a small point, however in my opinion it is critical. Unless each side to a conflict recognizes the other, it is impossible to move towards any kind of resolution. The Fatah led Palestinian Authority is still committed to the creation of a Palestinian State alongside Israel. So there is a degree of acceptance of the other. While not all in Israeli society and Palestinian society are prepared to do this – as is evident with Hamas and the Israeli far right– the overwhelming majority of Palestinians and Israelis see the other as part of a legitimate conflict. They might have radically different views about how to achieve a just solution, but the initial recognition offers the essential basis for progress to discussing those views. Thus, we need to avoid the tunnel vision of seeing the current violence as only the latest stage of a long-running conflict. In many ways it is a discrete moment. The forces that compose the conflict are far wider and offer important resources which need to be drawn on to bring this moment to an end.

I have focused on the way in which Gaza has been fashioned by the conflict. Gaza has been created by the conflict and its population reflects the demographics of war and displacement. Its administrations have been the results of military occupations and since 2007 a violent

coup. The creation of the Islamist Hamas regime has also meant that its international links especially with the Islamic Republic of Iran has brought a new a challenging factor into the conflict. Economically and socially Gaza bears all the hallmarks of the problems of the developing world. There is high unemployment with 50% of the population below the age of 25. The population lives with high levels of poverty. Due to the blockade, it suffers from a high degree of isolation which is reflected in economic social and political factors. At the same time Gaza has a high level of graduates and people with key skills such as in high tech. It also has agriculture, fishing and many workshops producing clothes and household goods. If economically reconnected to the region it can have a decent future.

I now want to turn making the connection between the specifics of Gaza, the current conflict and the politics needed to lead to a sustainable solution. Solving the current crisis will only be possible if the elements of the peace plan include proposals that reach the fundamental questions of the broader conflict. This is not a detailed plan for its resolution but the need to include elements that can point to such a result.

At root is the question of security. However, security needs to be placed in a political perspective. It is evident neither Palestinians nor Israelis have security in the current situation. Israel was unable to protect its citizens on October 7 and indeed over the years when many have lost their lives in wars and terrorist attacks. Palestinian lives have been lost in wars, the intifadas and as a result of the Israeli occupation. Since 1947, with the exception of the Oslo Agreements, the international community has to a high degree left Israelis and Palestinians to fight it out between themselves. Only when the international dimensions of the conflict impinge on other states are their signs of international action. The Houthis attacks on international shipping and the Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024 illustrate this.

However, as in 1947, there is a pressing need to internationalize the conflict through the creation of a security mechanism that can replace both the Hamas militias and the Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza. Israelis need to know that they can live without the fear of another massacre and Palestinians equally need to know that they can rebuild Gaza and their lives without the threat of yet another destructive war.

The international and regional response to the Iranian attack on April 13 do contain the seeds of how we might move to create a security mechanism that could assure both sides (Melman 2024). The direct involvement of Jordan and the indirect role of Saudi Arabia indicates that there are states in the region who can plan an important role. The part played by the USA, UK and France also underlines how these countries see their strategic interests. Ending the Gaza war is certainly a key objective for them. Having been involved in the fighting it would be a good time to think about the creation of an Arab League-NATO force that could contribute to the peace. Both the Arab League and the NATO members are committed to a two state-state solution so they would share a common vision for the region. A serious force that secured the boundaries between Israel, Egypt and Gaza could provide confidence building in both Israel and Palestine. It would radically alter the situation on the ground and provide safe environment for the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Such a development would also open the opportunity for new political initiatives in the governance of the Gaza strip. Much has been written about extending the writ of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) to Gaza. However, in doing so it would be important for the PA to commit to holding elections within a year. No election has been since 2006 and Palestinians and including those in Gaza do need to be able to choose who governs them. Parties and individuals who stood in elections will need to be committed to peace and

the renunciation of violence. This does not exclude those who support Islamist politics as many are committed to peace. For example, the leader of the Islamist United Arab List (RA'AM) Mansour Abbas joined a coalition in Israel between 2021-2022. He also made clear that the massacres on October 7 were against Muslim principles (Abbas 2023). Finding a new regime in Gaza could help renovate the Palestinian Authority and perhaps begin the process of bringing a new generation of leaders to take responsibility from an increasingly aging and demoralized government.

Without effective security in Gaza there will be no prospect of the investment needed to rebuild it. Estimates suggest that the cost will be in the region of \$50 billion (Razzaq 2023). However, investors, donors and states will be unwilling to do so if there is the possibility of another war bringing destruction of their investments. Continued Hamas control or an Israeli occupation regime (as has been proposed by Benjamin Netanyahu) would just lay the basis for just that. Thus, the most pressing need is to provide a genuine alternative to the security conditions that led to October 7 and the Gaza war.

Conclusion

The weight of history bears down on all aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The politics of the past eight decades has been suffused with the pain of loss, dispossession and injustice on both sides. At the same time collective and individual memory has played its part in transmitting this to each new generation. Jewish refugees from the pogroms and the Holocaust and Palestinian refugees have been reliving these memories as a result of October 7 and in the course of the subsequent war. The past is a living force in the present. The politics of Israelis and Palestinians bear its imprint. The competing narratives of history will not dissipate easily and remain factors that must be taken into account. However, the Oslo

process does indicate the possibilities that a 'historic reconciliation' is possible. The devastation brought about by October 7 and the Gaza war underline its necessity.

The issue is how to create the conditions in which this possible. It is indeed from the experience of the Oslo accords that we can discern some elements that need to be nourished anew. From the outset it was the international involvement in the conflict that was necessary. However, after the first phase of the negotiations were concluded international involvement became less reliable. There were many outward signs, the signing on the White House lawn, the Paris conference on economic support and regular visits to the region by many foreign politicians. However, the weakness of all this effort was contained in the ambivalence contained in the text of the Oslo agreements themselves, which did not specify the direction that Israelis and Palestinian were heading towards. There was no mention of the principle of self-determination or of a Palestinians state. The term 'mutual legitimate and political rights' was perhaps clever drafting as its was open to different interpretations. The Israeli government at the time did not support the creation of a Palestinian state. The PLO certainly thought that a Palestinian was a legitimate and political right. The idea was that the process of negotiations would provide the framework to resolving the differences. However, the ambiguity undermined confidence in the process, especially amongst the Palestinian public. It also allowed politicians in Israel to avoid giving leadership to the Israeli public on this critical question. As a consequence, the international efforts of the decade from 1993 dissipated. Palestinians and Israeli far from experiencing a peace dividend were to experience terrorism and violent conflict.

A new international initiative on the conflict is of course extremely difficult in an increasingly dysfunctional world order marked by sharp divisions on issues such as the

Russian-Ukrainian war. The United Nations as membership organization frequently reflects this disorder. However, the tensions in the region since October 7 threaten a regional war which would have profound international implications, as the Iranian attack on Israel has underlined. The United States and some of its allies such as the UK and France have been playing a critical role in trying to influence the Israeli government over the course of the war and the delivery of humanities aid. Regional states have also made a significant contribution in particular Jordan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. So, it is not so much that there is a will to act but a sense in which inaction could spell disaster.

A key factor will be the role of Saudi Arabia. Before October 7 it was evident that the Saudi-US negotiations over the recognition of Israel were advancing well. The Hamas attack derailed this. Saudi Arabia is no friend of Hamas, not only due its alliance with the Iran but because it is part of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Riyadh government has banned. Leaks from the talks indicated that Saudi Arabi's price were Israeli steps towards a Palestinian state. This is a much weaker condition that that contained in the Saudi-backed Arab Peace Plan of 2002 that requires the creation of a Palestinian state as the basis of Arab recognition of Israel. If the Saudis did play a role in a post-war Gaza that could be just the step in the direction of the Palestinian state that they insist on. Saudi recognition would be a major prize for Israel and could be the leverage that is needed to persuade the Israeli government to agree to an international dispensation in a post-war Gaza.

The way that the international community deals with the end of the Gaza war will have long term consequences. A ceasefire that merely brings hostilities to an end will be insufficient. The mutual horrors that Israelis and Palestinians have experienced since October 7 need to be addressed at their root. At the end of the day both parties will need to negotiate a settlement.

The modalities and the exact details will have to be left to Israelis and Palestinians. What the international community can do is to establish the destination of self-determination for both parties. One desirable initiative would be to set this principle in a binding United Nations Security Council resolution. This could be backed up by the recognition of the Palestinian state by all members of the United Nations who have not yet done so.⁵ Out of the destruction of the past months it is possible to see a different future. The first step is creating an internationalized security system in Gaza.

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⁵ In 2012 the United Nations General Assembly in resolution 67/19 recognized Palestine as a 'non-member state,' currently 140 states recognize the Palestinian state, but this could be enhanced with the addition of some major powers such as the USA.

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