

When It Comes to the Palestinians, What Does Israel Want?

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*It is difficult to imagine Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad accepting a hostage exchange deal that does not meet their immutable demand, which is a lasting ceasefire linked to a total Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. This, for them, is nonnegotiable, but for **Benjamin Netanyahu** and his hard-line coalition partners, an end to the war in this way can only mean defeat.*

Sunday's announcement by former defense minister and member of the War Cabinet **Benny Gantz** that he is resigning because Netanyahu has failed the Israeli public, including the families of the captives, and has never been able or willing to spell out a day-after plan for Gaza has compounded pressure on the government to call for early elections.

Assuming that the war will end soon or drag on for another few weeks or months, Israel will be looking for a way to declare victory. But even then, the question will be this: victory over whom and at what price? The political cost of the war, both domestically and abroad, is phenomenal. And then what comes next? The war will leave the entire population of Gaza, about 2 million people, homeless and battling a chronic humanitarian crisis for decades. Running this enclave will become an insurmountable challenge for any administration.

The deliberate destruction of Gaza in the most barbaric of ways can only mean that Israel was not going after Hamas but the Palestinians. Gaza has no more hospitals, universities, schools, residential areas, parks, stadiums or anything that denotes civilian life, including a society, culture and even cemeteries. This is a plan to drive people into extinction.

The war has dispatched Israel, the Palestinians, the region and the whole world back to the pre-1948 era, as if the last 75 years have meant nothing. The Palestinians remain stateless

and under occupation and Israel is yet to decide what it wants to be in this region.

The war on Gaza will not deliver answers. But it will bring these fundamental questions to the forefront. We all know where the Palestinian people stand: they want to end the occupation — by any means possible — and claim their right to self-determination. They have tried to do this through both national struggle and peace negotiations. Both have failed to deliver.

And while it is easy to blame the victims for missing opportunities, a few have dared point the finger at Israel itself for derailing agreements and violating international law. An appeasement policy led by the US brought us to the Oct. 7 watershed moment.

But the real question is, what does Israel want to do with the Palestinians? It has killed more than 37,000 of them in Gaza — so far — and destroyed most of the enclave. By the time the war ends, Gaza will have become unlivable, according to experts. Will Israel withdraw? Or will it occupy the Strip indefinitely? What about the Palestinians there? What future awaits them?

Suppose one believes that the Gaza war, with all the atrocities and horrors, will summon a new vigor to find a lasting peace in historical Palestine. In that case, one should look back at the evolution of the Israeli body politic in the last two decades. Netanyahu's long era in Israeli politics has empowered the far right — a toxic mix of ethnoreligious neofascists who openly talk about annexing the West Bank, colonizing Gaza and burying the Palestinians once and for all.

Netanyahu had hoped to use those who used to be on the fringe of Israeli politics to secure a majority in the Knesset. But now he has become their hostage. Similar to his, their agenda now occupies the center of the Israeli stage.

Netanyahu and his far-right partners do not want to give the Palestinians anything. They openly state that Oslo is over, the Palestinian Authority will be defunded and the UN Relief and Works Agency will be banned, as the momentum to annex most of the West Bank is at its height. The two-state solution is anathema to the far right. In the final phase, as Vladimir Jabotinsky and later Meir Kahane preached, the transfer of Palestinians will ensure complete Jewish control of the land.

We do not hear a rebuttal from the far right's political rivals. Gantz, Yair Lapid, Avigdor Lieberman and Yoav Gallant, all potential successors of Netanyahu and his cronies, are all openly against the two-state solution. They are against giving up any territory in the West Bank, not to mention the Syrian Golan Heights. East Jerusalem is a red line for all. So, what are the Biden administration and its Western allies talking about when they declare they are behind a two-state solution?

The Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas have radicalized Israeli society even further. The Israeli left is no more. The so-called doves have been marginalized by a new generation of Israeli politicians. Netanyahu has claimed that there is no Palestinian peace partner. Still, in reality, it is the Palestinians who today cannot find an Israeli politician who presents himself as a partner for peace.

When the Gaza war is finally over, Israelis will face this question: what to do with the Palestinians? One has to understand that there is a Zionist master plan and that, after

decades of intermittent wars and uprisings, that plan remains on target. Netanyahu and his extremist partners are clear about the objective; for them, this is an existential struggle: one ethnostate in all of historical Palestine — and maybe beyond.

Since the late 1980s, the concept of the land-for-peace deal, evolving into the two-state solution, had been a bipartisan US roadmap aimed at resolving what the Arab-Israeli conflict was then. But Donald Trump's election changed all that. The core of the Republican Party is now aligned with Israel's far-right agenda. Republican lawmakers are openly distancing themselves from the two-state solution for ideological, religious or selfish political reasons. The Democratic Party is divided and the Gaza war has splintered its ranks.

If anything good has come out of the war on Gaza, it is this: the Palestine cause is now universal. Israel has become a pariah state facing accusations of genocide. Its top government leaders may soon be indicted for war crimes. Global public opinion has shifted against it. A grassroots movement in Western colleges and universities is here to stay. Israel's Western allies must choose between upholding international law and siding with a rogue state.

The Zionist agenda is under attack, but locally it is still on course. The systemic colonization of the West Bank is picking up speed. The situation in the West Bank is about to explode at any moment. The specter of a regional war is hovering over the Middle East.

Where Israel goes from here concerning the Palestinians is likely to be answered by the outcome of future Israeli elections. Israelis will have to choose, and their choice will determine where the rest of the world and the region go from there.

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