

Original Paper

To Peace, or Not to Peace: The Prospect of “Peace” in the Gaza Strip and West Bank

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Abstract

In the protracted and deeply rooted Israel-Palestine conflict, efforts toward lasting peace remain fraught with complexity and division. Historical animosities, entrenched ideological divides, and cycles of violence have shaped a volatile region where conventional solutions often fall short. This article examines key moments, such as the Second Intifada and the October 7 Hamas attack, to underscore the systemic challenges that have perpetuated unrest. While the one-state and two-state models have dominated discourse, this analysis advocates for a more pragmatic approach, prioritizing humanitarian relief, regional stability, and incremental trust-building measures. Through a focus on shared security frameworks, enhanced Palestinian autonomy, and robust international engagement—particularly by the United States—the paper explores actionable steps that could reduce hostilities and establish a foundation for peace. By embracing realistic strategies grounded in mutual interests, the path to a more secure and just future for both Israelis and Palestinians may still be attainable.

Keywords

Israel-Palestine conflict, peace process, humanitarian relief, regional stability, one-state solution, two-state solution

1. Introduction

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria penetrated defensive lines in the Sinai and Golan Heights in a surprise attack that commenced the Yom Kippur War (Sachs, 2024). Not a day after the 50th anniversary of that conflict, Hamas militants colored the sky in an assault that would claim the lives of some 1,200 Israelis (American Jewish Committee, n.d.). Deemed the “deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust”, the October 7th assault saw families massacred in their homes, people burned alive,

and children (allegedly) (Tenbarge & Chan, 2023) beheaded (American Jewish Committee, n.d.). For folks outside of Israel, the sheer terror, trauma, and fear incurred, and the apprehension surrounding a third attack is severely underestimated (Sachs, 2024). As Marc Champion evocatively put it: “Oct. 7 wasn’t just another terrorist attack, but rather [...] an absolute threat to the existence of [...] Israel [...]. The psychopathic savagery of Hamas [...] signaled [...] its dedication to the eradication of Israel [...] ‘from the river to the sea’” (Champion, 2024).

As the conflict approaches its first anniversary, 33,000 Palestinians have been massacred in the Gaza strip, tens of thousands have been displaced, and nearly five hundred incidents of settler violence have been reported on the West Bank (Nasser & Jeffery, 2024). Negotiators have exhausted nearly all combinations of land swaps and security arrangements to no avail (The Economist, 2023). Considering the emanating national, religious, and personal animosities, this paper argues that while “peace” is unfeasible in the short-term, incremental cooperation between Israel, Palestine, and the US may ameliorate humanitarian conditions, suppress the risk of regional escalation, and carve out a path for enduring peace.

2. “Peace”: A Historical Perspective

Recent events have re-erected personal animosities from the century-long conflict (Sachs, 2024). Consequently, complete reconciliation between Israel and Palestine may be out of reach for the time being (Sachs, 2024). That being said, the notion that absolute, unwavering peace may be unachievable is no reason to neglect moderate proposals that aim to broker peace with a lowercase “p” (Sachs, 2024). This is especially the case when such options hold the potential to reduce what Craig Mokhiber of the United Nations called a “text-book case of genocide” (Burga, 2024) and better the terms for future negotiation—peace being the be-all and end-all. To understand what such “peace” entails, it is necessary to analyze the history of the conflict and illustrate the levels of violence and diplomatic engagement involved.

Netanyahu has historically opposed any solution to the conflict. At most, he has aired support for a two-state solution, stated one will not materialize and shut down moderate alternatives (Sachs, 2015). As British foreign secretary Philip Hammond observed, “Netanyahu act[s] as though he would prefer a ‘permanent state of standoff’” (Sachs, 2015). What informs the absence of a clear-cut strategy amongst Israeli leadership is not, however, contempt or obliviousness, but a commitment to the belief that there exists no quick and easy solution to the conflict (Sachs, 2015). Coined “anti-solutionism” by Nathan Sachs, leading author on Israeli foreign policy, Israel’s strategy, or lack thereof, was ushered in by a string of policy failures in the 2000s and 2010s (Sachs, 2024).

Prior, Israel employed blunt military force to coerce its neighbors into conformity (Sachs, 2024). However, the Second Intifada put this “solutionist” approach into question (Sachs, 2024). After then

Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem shortly after the anniversary of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, Palestinians were outraged, coordinating demonstrations of civil disobedience (Adam, 2020). Recognizing the potential for widespread backlash to Sharon's visit, Israel had, in effect, baited Palestine into giving them grounds to "mow the grass", referring to Israel's strategy of periodic military operations to whittle down the operational capacity of militant groups in the Gaza strip. 1.3 million rounds of ammunition and countless military incursions later, Palestine suffered 5,000 casualties in a bloody conflict spanning a half-decade (Adam, 2020). Channeling years of frustration that had been building from the perceived failure of the Oslo Accords and the rapid expansion of Israeli settlement (Adam, 2020), Palestinians retaliated—with suicide bombings among other tactics—leading Israeli leadership to conclude that solutionism pointlessly engendered undue violence and instability (Sachs, 2024). Since then, Israel has "kicked the can down the road" (Sachs, 2015): putting up high-tech border defenses, (TOI Staff & AFP, 2023) investing in economic growth and development (Bard, n.d.), and learning to live with a low level of chronic violence (Sachs, 2024). Hence, a resolution to the conflict may be deemed successful if it spearheads a return to this degree of violence.

3. Efficacy of Potential Solutions

Though the Yom Kippur War and the October 7th attack took place a half-century apart, they were both made possible by overconfidence in Israel's state-of-the-art defense apparatus (relative to the rest of the Middle East) and security strategy (Bar-Joseph & Cohen, 2023). In the leadup to the 1973 attack, Israeli intelligence analysts fed into their *conceptzia*, meaning security conception in Hebrew, that Egypt's military was incapable of engaging in the deep penetration bombing necessary to open up Israeli frontlines and, accordingly, had no intention to start a war (Sachs, 2024). Consequently, ominous evidence of Egyptian and Syrian intentions was either reinterpreted to conform to the *conceptzia* or discarded entirely (Sachs, 2024). Complacency and confirmation bias are, in large part, responsible for the October 7th attack. The possibility of Hamas pulling off a coordinated attack of such a scale had not occurred to Israeli military planners even in worst-case calculations, and the Hamas themselves were taken aback by the immense operational success (Bar-Joseph & Cohen, 2023).

Following the offensive, Israel's decisive military mobilization has been scrutinized by various humanitarian organizations and international observers. Still, it is tough to dispute that its conduct has re-instilled reverence for Israel's military by putting on full display the lengths the state is willing to go to to achieve the "full eradication of Hamas" (Bar-Joseph & Cohen, 2023). Nevertheless, the reputational damage has already been inflicted. Regional actors—Iran, Hezbollah, and the "axis of resistance", comprised of armed allies in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza—have taken the initial success of October 7th to mean that weakening Israel is, indeed, attainable, and may involve similar

surprise attacks in their prospective security strategies (Bar-Joseph & Cohen, 2023; Zoran, 2024). Growing confidence amongst regional threats, hand in hand with Iran's nuclear creep, Biden's souring relationship with Netanyahu, and existential paranoia in Israeli military cabins have led leadership to believe that any proposal that does not result in the total neutralization of Hamas is tantamount to accepting another October 7 attack in the future (Zoran, 2024; Viña, 2024). Palestine is dealing with their own set of grievances. Six months in, Israel's brutal, indiscriminate response in Gaza has killed 33,000 Palestinians, 70 percent of whom were women and children (Felbab-Brown et al., 2024). The International Court of Justice condemned these acts as potentially constituting a genocide (Al-Kassab, 2024), and the United Nations has flagged Israel for countless war crimes (Eltahir, 2023) and "clear violations of international humanitarian war" (Guterres, 2023). The warring parties are firmly wedded to the belief that they will cease to exist if the other claims control, incentivizing them to pursue rash preemptive measures (Sachs, 2024), and, for Israel, to settle for no less than complete eradication of Hamas (Bar-Joseph & Cohen, 2023).

Scholarly circles commonly point to ramped-up American pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the cause for failure to reach settlement. Despite facing pressure from the military stalemate in Gaza (Bourekba, 2024), domestic outcry to bring Israeli hostages home (Bourekba, 2024), and broadening international isolation (Bourekba, 2024), Netanyahu's acts of militancy will continue unabated so long as the Biden Administration continues to hand over blank checks in support of his campaign (Levy, 2024). This highlights the distinction between *possibility* (if an outcome is probable when employing all tools at hand) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and *probability* (if an outcome is probable on its own) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is well within the realm of possibility that peace in the Gaza Strip and West Bank may be brokered if Biden holds the US' commitment to defend Israel from international scrutiny and unconditional military aid over Netanyahu's head. However, it is improbable given the seven-decade-long, symbiotic relationship between the US and Israel, involving hundreds of billions of dollars worth of foreign aid (Masters & Merrow, 2024) and 89 vetoes at the UNSC (O'Dell, 2024). It is crucial to discern the Biden Administration's policy shifts towards Israel from its public rhetoric and promises, much of which has pandered to large blocks of pro-Palestine voters in swing states like Michigan, Virginia, Georgia, Arizona, and Pennsylvania (Contreras, 2023). This divergence was painfully apparent when Biden drew "red lines" around the Israeli city of Rafah earlier this March before quickly backstepping, stating that he would "never [...] leave Israel" and that there was "no red line where [he] would cut off [...] weapons" (Wolfgang, 2024). Even as he publicly bashed Netanyahu "complicity" with fiery rhetoric, insider reports showed that he was hesitant to reorient US foreign policy (Lee et al., 2024).

While proposals are numerous, most discussion surrounds a "one-state" or "two-state" solution. The former describes "a single state including Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza" which would "include all

Israelis and Palestinians and [...] be governed [...] by a secular, liberal Western-style democracy, supposedly at peace” (Sachs, 2024). The October 7th attack and the ensuing war have laid bare the wishful thinking that underlies this approach. One state advocates naively assume life under the same roof would automatically see the abandonment of sacred religious and nationalist commitments, belligerents laying down their weapons, and opposing factions conveniently forgetting a century of existential trepidation and vile traumas (Sachs, 2024). The fallout post-October 7 has soured a potential two-state solution as well, surmising of two sovereign states that each exercise political independence. Disagreement presides over the delegation of Jerusalem which both sides treat as holy soil, and designate as their rightful capital (Ban, 2009). Thus far, proposals have ranged from advocating for West Jerusalem to serve the Israeli capital and East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital (Ban, 2009), to shared sovereignty over a unified Jerusalem (Battaglia, 2022).

With Israelis perceiving Palestinian sovereignty as an existential threat and Palestinians living through the flattening of the Gaza strip, the path to Israeli-Palestinian normalization will be long and arduous, if successful at all. Rather than turning to the US’ perennially unsuccessful strategy of drawing up another unworkable two-state solution (Chao-Fong, 2024), rapprochement should begin with baby steps that address shared security concerns and push for greater independence for Palestinians in civilian affairs (Sachs, 2024). In practice, this would look like (1) delegating administrative powers currently controlled by Israeli authorities to the Palestinian Authority (PA), including education, healthcare, and infrastructure development; (2) limiting the transfer of security authority to ensure Israeli control over border security, major checkpoints, and coordination with PA police; (3) utilizing political leverage to reduce violence against Palestinian civilians and halt the expansion of Israeli settlements through conditional aid, diplomatic pressure, and international monitoring mechanisms; and (4) implementing a collaborative effort between Israel, Egypt, the PA, and Gulf states to stabilize and develop Gaza, involving reconstruction projects funded by international donors, economic development initiatives to create jobs and support businesses, and political reforms to reduce extremist influence (Sachs, 2024).

Simultaneously, the US should establish closely-enforced ground rules in the interim before conflict resolution becomes possible (Sachs, 2024). For there to be fruitful diplomacy with Israel, radical jihadist organizations like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad must not play a significant role in post-war governance (Sachs, 2024). The US should end tolerance for international financing of these groups (Sachs, 2024). On the flip side, containing the backsliding of PA legitimacy is a precursor to productive Palestinian self-governance (Sachs, 2024). By committing to political reform, civilian autonomy, and suppression of violence in the West Bank, the PA may slowly shed its deeply unpopular and corrupted legacy (Sachs, 2024). Despite these measures, Israeli opposition to an aggrandized PA role is to be expected. The Israeli public and politicians, with Netanyahu at the helm, perceive sectarian Palestinian forces prominent to the second intifada as the problem rather than the solution (Segal, 2023).

All things considered, while complete peace is doubtful in the short-term, gradual, good-faith collaboration between Israel, Palestine, the US, and neighboring Middle Eastern states directed at assuaging security fears and enlarging independence in Palestinian civilian affairs may carve a path towards a “less terrible” future.

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