

A Post-Ceasefire Analysis

Description

by Norman Finkelstein via [Norman Finkelstein.substack](#)

Israel's war on the Gaza Strip has resumed in full force. The intensity of its bombing and shelling is as intense as before the truce, perhaps even more so. Israel will however find it difficult to continue this campaign for another 50 days. Even if it does, the results are unlikely to be significantly different than what we saw during the first 50 days. In other words, eliminating Palestinian military capabilities in the Gaza Strip, let alone eradicating the presence of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others from the territory, is an unattainable objective.

But Israel is extremely unlikely to be permitted another 50 days of war by its US and European sponsors. Their foremost concern, increasingly likely with each passing day, is uncontrolled regional escalation and the ramifications this could have on their regional and global interests, and on their economies as well. Their statements of concern about the staggering levels of death and destruction in the Gaza Strip, and about the humanitarian emergency which is predicted to result in epidemics, perhaps even famine, in the Gaza Strip, are for public consumption. After all, it's a little disingenuous for these governments to wail about a reality they encouraged, justified, defended, enabled, and in many cases directly participated in creating. It's equally the case that these governments, and the US in particular, could transform this reality with a single phone call. If they so choose. Rather, these statements of concern are designed to deflect public and political pressure upon such governments for a change of policy, provide cover for their complicity in Israel's war, and present a more acceptable rationale for eventually calling a halt to Israel's offensive.

According to press reports, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu informed US President Biden that Israel would need at least an additional two months to achieve its objectives. The US response was reportedly that Israel has only two weeks. Sounds plausible in view of the above factors. The message to the Israeli government would have been along the lines of "We gave you unlimited support, everything you need, and you've already had 50 days to achieve it. Regrettably, you weren't up to the job. We now need to find an alternative to your military mediocrity that is somewhat more effective."

Even though I have argued that Israel should be analyzed as not only a radical but also an irrational state, Washington when it so chooses retains the power and leverage to set policy for its client regime. That's certainly the case with respect to major issues that directly affect US interests, and where the US controls the arms supply and other crucial factors like a vote at the UN Security Council.

I suspect that within the next week or so we will see a new truce agreement. It is likely to be more extended than the previous one, and see complex negotiations about further exchanges of captives. These could break down and result in a new round of warfare, but that too is likely to be short and sharp.

Ultimately, and once again assuming Israel continues to fail militarily (the most likely and plausible but

not a certain scenario), the Palestinians are not going to release their most valuable prisoners, the senior Israeli military officers, without obtaining the release of senior Palestinian leaders in Israeli prisons. They will also seek a guaranteed end to Israel's war on the Gaza Strip and the withdrawal of Israeli forces to their 7 October positions. This will be a very bitter pill for Israel to swallow, but the results of military failure tend to be bitter, and the US and Europe will help Netanyahu (or whoever replaces him) take his medicine.

This leaves a fundamental question in which Western and Israeli interests remain closely aligned, unresolved: removing Hamas as a governing authority from the Gaza Strip. The most logical resolution would be for Palestinians to choose their own leaders, but this is a non-starter for both the only democracy in the Middle East and the world's greatest democracy. In my view a Palestinian coalition makes the most sense, not only because no single Palestinian movement has the requisite qualifications to single-handedly administer the Palestinians in these territories, but also because such a construction would assist in the revitalization of the Palestinian national movement. For example as a prelude to the integration of Hamas and PIJ into the PLO, and the formation of a new national leadership committed to pursuing Palestinian rights rather than US and Israeli approval.

At this stage in their struggle Palestinians require pluralism more than elections. Although the US and Europe are in principle open to the idea of a Palestinian government chosen and appointed by Washington and Brussels administering both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel has invested decades in promoting Palestinian fragmentation, will be bitterly opposed to re-unification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and on this issue is unlikely to be challenged by its Western sponsors. As importantly, Israel will prevent any coalition government that includes Hamas from taking office and discharging its mandate in the West Bank. Which probably means Hamas won't accept it in the Gaza Strip.

But Israel and its Western partners are determined to remove Hamas as a governing authority from the Gaza Strip. On this point, my dear friend Ibrahim and I both almost died laughing this evening discussing the latest idea emerging from the Washington echo chamber. It's genuinely that ridiculous, and that detached from reality. Basically, there is serious discussion of applying the same formula to Hamas in Gaza that was used to extract the PLO from Beirut in 1982.

In 1982, the US engineered an agreement whereby the PLO, both leadership and cadres, boarded trucks and ships in the port of Beirut, and withdrew from Lebanon, primarily to Algeria, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. That agreement was possible for several reasons: the PLO could justify leaving Lebanon, because Lebanon was a foreign country whose capital city was being destroyed by Israel; the decision to withdraw was endorsed (and in some cases encouraged) by the PLO's Lebanese allies; the PLO had formal Arab legitimacy (it is a full member of the Arab League), and also international legitimacy (it has permanent observer status at the UN); and the US provided security guarantees for the unarmed Palestinian civilians the PLO would leave behind. The following month Israel perpetrated the Sabra-Shatila massacres via its fascist Lebanese proxies. The US had knowledge of these massacres in real time, did nothing to stop them, and the Palestinians learned an unforgettable lesson in the value – that is, worthlessness – of US commitments.

In 2023 the idea would be that Hamas, or at least its leadership, senior echelons, and fighters, would depart their Palestinian homeland for a life of exile. In other words, voluntarily commit political and organizational suicide, and relinquish their main source of leverage, so that Israel and the US can

claim the victory Israel's military was unable to achieve on the ground. And once abroad, explain to their constituents and Palestinians more generally, that they carefully considered the matter and concluded that saving their own skins justifies the extraordinary price Palestinians have had to pay to make this possible. Only in Washington...

Finding governments prepared to receive several thousand PLO fighters in 1982 was a real challenge. Finding ones willing to receive Hamas in 2023, particularly its military members, will be virtually impossible. Recalling the US guarantees of 1982, it also seems reasonable to assume that if Hamas leaders and cadres board a ship in what's left of Gaza harbor it will be sunk by an Israeli torpedo before it leaves port, and if they leave by land will be picked off by Israel's death squads soon after. Unless Karim Khan's ICC grabs them first in a further act of fealty to non-members US and Israel.

If this war proceeds as anticipated, the US and Israel will need to reconcile themselves to Israel's failure to achieve a decisive outcome. Israel will probably opt for a period of more limited strikes, incursions, assassinations, and similar operations, which Hamas is unlikely to leave without response. But wars of attrition are not Israel's strength, and at a certain point a more durable cessation of hostilities will have to be reached.

That could give the West time to consider the possibility of accepting the principle of Palestinians choosing their own representatives. And consider alternatives to active support or passive acquiescence to Israel's agenda with respect to Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli relations. It won't happen under Biden, who apart from sprinkling a few dollars over UNRWA has maintained each of Trump's Palestine policies. This includes the closure of the representative office in Washington of the PLO/PA, which Blinken is now promoting as Gaza's new governing authority.