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WAR IN GAZA: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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Op-Ed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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HOPES OF A TRUCE IN GAZA AT THE END OF MAY HAVE ONCE AGAIN BEEN SHATTERED. WHAT CAN WE NOW EXPECT ON THE BATTLEFIELD?

Nearly eight months into the war in Gaza, attempts to obtain a ceasefire have been multiplied, but never succeeded. The most recent failed negotiation in early May is particularly discouraging, as certain favorable conditions, at the time, appeared to be prevalent. Both Hamas and Israel examined a proposal submitted to them by Egypt and Qatar, and each indicated their readiness to accept it, before disagreeing on the specific terms of the agreement. Two different versions of this text were circulated: after Hamas indicated that it had given its agreement, it turned out that the text was different from the one submitted to Israel. The differences, however, were slight. A truce had probably never been so close to achieve, in as much as the agreement in question offered real prospects. On the one hand, it called for a long-lasting pause in the bombardments, and on the other hand, for substantial mutual, release of hostages and prisoners, culminating via a three-step process, for an eventual cessation of hostilities. In retrospect, it appears to have been a form of a deceptive poker game, with each side placing the blame for the failure of the negotiations on the other. In the case of Benjamin Netanyahu, one has to underline the audacity, even arrogance, of this refusal vis-à-vis his American partner, who had spared no effort to obtain these overtures, deserves special attention. This choice will leave its mark on Israeli American relations, as evidenced by the Biden administration's subsequent decision to temporarily suspend some weapon deliveries.

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This situation inevitably leads us to question the objectives of the current offensive against Rafah. Netanyahu's actions are, today, constrained by the composition of his coalition: he could not accept the ceasefire without running the risk of seeing the right-wing leave the government, and the coalition's collapse. His personal plight has also

become an important factor in the conflict. The end of the war will hold him accountable, politically and certainly judicially. For this reason, we can expect him to maintain the conflict for as long as possible. Meanwhile, the Israeli army has taken control of the Philadelphia corridor between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and is threatening Rafah.

In the best-case scenario, as ceasefire negotiations continue unabated, the aim may be to step up military pressure to extract more concessions from Hamas. A second scenario would see the army close all access to the Gaza Strip, eliminating Hamas leaders one by one. This would give

Netanyahu the victory he needs to consider an end to the conflict. But there exists a third, even more worrying scenario, whereby the Israeli government's intention would be to completely empty the Gaza Strip, orchestrating a forced displacement of the population, which would further aggravate tensions with Egypt, tensions which are already very high. Marshal Sissi has been increasingly issuing warnings and has even gone so far as to call into question the 1978 Camp David Accords.

All these developments suggest that the conflict is likely to drag on. Hamas is also poised to harden its position if it senses the noose further tightening on its neck. All actors have the November 2024 US elections in sight. Netanyahu is clearly anticipating this deadline. If Biden is re-elected, he will need to readjust his policy towards the United States, but if Trump wins, the rules of the game will change. Meanwhile, the failure of the ceasefire agreement is also being felt on the border with Lebanon.

The escalation remains under control for the moment, but there are daily bombardments and human casualties. Northern Israel is now virtually deserted: over a hundred thousand Israelis have been relocated to hotels across the country, and pressure is mounting on the Netanyahu government demanding their return. Many of these families earn their living from farming; it was particularly important for them to return in time for the harvest. Beyond the agricultural question, the cost of the conflict in Israel is constantly mounting, on the human, economic and infrastructure levels, as Hezbollah is systematically destroying surveillance installations. On the other hand, southern Lebanon is also paying a huge price. Entire villages were razed to the ground, populations displaced, and material destruction amounting to over USD 1.5 billion, in a country that has already collapsed economically.

HAVE THE WAR DEVELOPMENTS CHANGED THE POLITICAL EQUATION, NOT ONLY IN ISRAEL BUT ALSO IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES AND THE REGION AS A WHOLE? ARE THERE PLANS FOR A WAY OUT OF THE CONFLICT?

Clearly, the failure of the negotiations has political consequences. In Israel, the establishment began to settle scores. The armed forces are very demoralized, and for the first time, the Mossad has publicly admitted that mistakes were made on October 7, 2023. The edifice of Israel's government and security forces is badly shaken. On the Hamas side, no information is leaking, so it's very difficult to assess the situation. The Gazan population is paying a terrible price, and we can only assume that there is growing resentment towards the Hamas leadership, at least as

regards its Gazan constituent. But this doesn't mean that the Palestinians have forgiven the Palestinian Authority for its total inertia over the last few years. Even if there is resentment towards Hamas, there is still no alternative solution to govern the Palestinian territory.

Hopes for the resumption of real negotiations on "the day after," under the aegis of the region's major Arab states, have also been dashed. On a regional level, no one today is capable of influencing the reshaping of the Palestinian political landscape. Certain Hamas figures are taking advantage of the situation to try and reinvent themselves. This is particularly true of



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those in Qatar and Turkey. During his recent visit to Ankara, Ismail Haniyeh made some important statements, indicating that in the event of a lasting ceasefire, Hamas was ready to rebuild the Palestinian authority, hinting that it might join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), or even recognize the 1967 borders.

A silent reconfiguration is therefore underway, albeit without the sponsorship of major neighbors. Saudi Arabia, which one might have thought would play a role in this respect, seems to be preparing to resume the normalization effort with Israel, banking on a post-conflict situation in which Hamas would have been permanently weakened. Officially, normalization is still conditional upon reaching an agreement on the Palestinian question, but in reality, the Saudis are more concerned with negotiating a new security agreement with the United States. This would involve a historic new defense pact, similar to the one concluded in the 1940s, in which the US pledged to extend the American security umbrella to the Gulf, in addition to including provisions for building nuclear power plants.

Saudi Arabia is seeking to obtain as many guarantees as possible from the Americans, as an insurance policy for their bilateral relations once the conflict is over and Hamas is practically eliminated from the equation. However, despite the human losses, destruction and being besieged, Hamas, like Hezbollah and other armed groups affiliated (proxies) with Iran, is doing rather well. These similar players continue to build their political legitimacy. One of the aims of October 7 was to derail the normalization process and put the Palestinian question back on the table, with Hamas as the key player, and behind Hamas, Iran. For months now, the Iranians have been keeping a low profile, but they too have been biding their time. They now know that when the time comes to reach a lasting agreement in the region, they will be at the negotiating table. Today, Iran is involved, on an almost daily basis, in discussions with the Americans and the Saudis, just as Israel negotiates almost directly with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

In this respect, the Israeli Iranian strikes and counter-strikes sequence can be interpreted as a form of rough rehearsal for what could one day be the major confrontation in the Middle East, in the absence of a peace agreement. Iran has proven that it is capable of striking Israel: in this case, Israel was saved by the arsenal of air defenses deployed throughout the region. The operation was very costly but proved that Israel could be vulnerable. Just as Israel showed that it was capable of striking Iran in the heart. Iran, for its part, showed its projection capabilities, but also its capacity for restraint. The message, particularly for the Americans, was that Iran is also a rational player.

IF TRUMP WINS, THE SITUATION WILL BECOME EXTREMELY VOLATILE

The focus is now on the US elections. This is where the real tipping point lies. If Trump wins, the situation will become extremely volatile. Trump boasted in a recent interview that he would have included Iran in the Abraham Accords. However, when he was in power, he only talked about confrontation with Iran. His personal relationship with Netanyahu is very bad, but if his son-in-law Jared Kushner were to become National Security Advisor, then the American Israeli friendship would be back on track. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are hoping to secure pledges from the Biden administration while they still can. But it is far from certain that the US Congress will accept their requests. Four years ago, the Houthis hit the Saudi territory when they struck Aramco facilities, but the United States failed to react. This, in turn, explains their desire to draw closer to the Iranians. Today, too many different players have a vested interest in the continuation of the conflict. Meanwhile, civilians are left to suffer, and a lasting hatred prevails.



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