

Israel's Pyrrhic Victory in Gaza, Netanyahu Is Real Winner

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Egypt has once again been thrust onto the forefront of brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi remarked on Monday that a ceasefire might still be within reach.

As he put it, "Egypt is going to great lengths to reach a ceasefire between the Israelis and Palestinians — and hope still exists." A report in the right-wing Jewish paper *Algemeiner* also shares this opinion.

The [paper said](#) there is "growing pressure" on Israel from the Biden Administration, and it is "mulling the terms of a ceasefire agreement... A halt could be forthcoming in the near future now that the IDF (armed forces) and Israel's security cabinet have completed a number of objectives, including destroying a Hamas tunnel network and eliminating senior members of the organisation."

Equally, the White House readouts of President Joe Biden's successive calls with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday hinted that Washington is seeking a swift end to the conflict.

While repeating the old cliché "Israel-has- the-right-to-defend-itself", Biden ended the [conversation with Netanyahu](#) voicing his "support for steps to enable the Palestinian people to enjoy the dignity, security, freedom, and economic opportunity that they deserve and affirmed his support for a two-state solution."

In the [conversation with Abbas](#), Biden "highlighted the recent U.S. decision to resume assistance to the Palestinian people, including economic and humanitarian assistance to benefit Palestinians in the West bank and Gaza. The President also underscored his strong commitment to a negotiated two-state solution as the best path to reach a just and lasting resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

These were calming words. What takes the breath away is the statement made by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US Representative to the United Nations at the UN Security Council Briefing on Sunday regarding the Situation in Israel, the West Bank, and

Gaza.

The ambassador, a former career diplomat, holds a Cabinet-level position and her statement, as delivered, would carry the imprimatur of the White House. The [salience of the statement](#) lies in its marked shift away from any unilateral, unequivocal expressions of US support for Israel. Arguably, it spoke disapprovingly of Israel's behaviour in the current conflict situation.

Specifically, it urged Israel to avoid "evictions – including in East Jerusalem – demolitions, and settlement construction east of the 1967 lines. And critically, all parties need to uphold and respect the historic status quo at the holy sites".

However, when the crunch time came at the United Nations Security Council, the United States [once more blocked](#) even a statement calling for a ceasefire. On the other hand, Netanyahu struck a defiant stance in a [televised address on Sunday](#) saying, "Our campaign against the terrorist organisations is continuing with full force. We are acting now, for as long as necessary, to restore calm and quiet to you, Israel's citizens. It will take time."

Indeed, it was a [Bloody Sunday in Gaza](#), with "the highest number of victims" in just one day since the start of conflict. The updated toll is 218 Palestinian victims, including 58 minors and 34 women, more than 1230 injured. The toll in West Bank is at least 21 Palestinians killed. Clearly, The UN Security Council meeting has ended with nothing.

Evidently, Netanyahu remains confident that Israel still holds the diplomatic blank check that the US gave it all through past decades to pursue its policies of occupation and repression and continue with the steady annexation of Palestinian territory and expansion of Israeli settlements that brings it closer to the one-state reality — that is, a Jewish state.

The Council on Foreign Relations president and former State Department director of policy planning, [Richard Haass said Monday](#),

"Netanyahu has come to believe that he can ignore Joe Biden, he can ignore any president of the United States, because, at the end of the day, he has Congress, he has Orthodox Jews, he has evangelical Christians and they can box in a president of the United States."

But this is also applicable to Europe. The British historian and former ambassador Craig Murray framed the paradigm in this stark way:

"Western politicians obviously believe that the Palestinians should accept apartheid quietly, and should have the good grace silently to wither away... It is absolutely plain there is no political process of any kind in train to alleviate the Palestinian plight, that even those "liberal" western politicians who floated the idea of a "two state solution" meant, at best, internationally recognised apartheid and bantustans."

Yet, from all indications, this is not a preplanned conflict by either Israel or Hamas. Neither side wants a full-fledged war. At the end of the day, the Biden Administration too may not want the clashes to continue as it could have ramifications for its larger regional strategies, especially the negotiations over Iran nuclear deal.

What emerges is that Israel is pressing ahead with its objective to weaken the Hamas and

Islamic Jihad. But Hamas is showing that it still retains the capability to retaliate. [Hamas announced today](#) a new wave of massive rocket bombardments of Israeli cities and army bases in response to Israel's strikes. Overall, 3200 rockets have been fired at Israel from Gaza in the past 8-day period.

Even if the Israeli military objective is realised, it can only be a Pyrrhic victory insofar as it is the Iran-led resistance movement that eventually stands to gain. Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh has [turned toward the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) — its Quds Force Commander Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani — and [Ali Akbar Velayati](#), advisor to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Surely, Hamas will further boost its deterrent capability. In political terms too, Hamas has broken the glass ceiling. Its appeal is expanding among Palestinians in Jerusalem, West Bank and elsewhere within Israel. The moment is arriving where Hamas becomes the voice of all Palestinians, not simply the Palestinians in Gaza. The international community will have to gradually deal with the consequences of that eventuality.

For Israel, on the other hand, the current clashes highlight that there is no “peace” and no “new Middle East.” It would now be inconceivable that the Saudi leadership could contemplate normalising ties with Israel in the near term. Again, the Abraham Accords did nothing to resolve underlying conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Libya — or the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The region “remains the same blood-soaked mess as ever”, as Washington Post columnist Max Boot put it.

Above all, in the court of world opinion, sympathy tips in favour of the Palestinians. Unsurprisingly, Hamas is portrayed as the guardian of Palestinians, whereas, Israel with its indiscriminate missile attacks against civilian targets in Gaza is perceived as the aggressor.

Meanwhile, the public opinion in the US has also been steadily becoming favourable to the Palestinians. [A Gallup poll](#) published in March found that 30 percent of Americans held a favorable opinion of Palestinians, up from 21 percent in 2018. Among Democrats, 53 percent want the US to pressure Israel more — the first time a majority has taken that position. Substantial pressure on Biden to act is coming also from the progressive Democrats who strive to elevate support for the Palestinian cause from the fringes to the mainstream.

But although Americans are warming to the Palestinians, they still favour Israel by wide margins. Evidently, Biden is walking a fine line. It goes to the credit of Biden that he did not exacerbate the conflict, as Donald Trump might have done. But call it inertia or passivity or low-key approach, Biden may also have exposed that the US has become an ineffectual power in the Middle East and that its influence is rapidly waning. This will have consequences.

To be sure, [Netanyahu is the winner](#). The escalation of violence with the Palestinians has stoked nationalist passions inside Israel, which virtually shuts the door on an opposition coalition replacing him. Netanyahu gains immunity from prosecution on corruption charges so long as he remains prime minister.

The right-wing lawmaker and a key figure in the negotiations between the opposition factions, Naftali Bennett, who heads the pro-settler Yamina party, seems to be already moving toward resuming negotiations with Netanyahu to form the next coalition

government.

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Featured image: Building housing the offices of Associated Press and other media collapses after Israeli airstrike, Gaza City, May 15, 2021. (Source: Indian Punchline)

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