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Gaza's Crisis, Israeli Ambition, and US Decline

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

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As Israel's military kills and injures hundreds of civilians in Gaza – whose population Israel is legally obligated to protect as an occupying power – people around the world, including in the United States, wonder why official Washington appears so indifferent to even the most graphic instances of “collateral damage.”

The primary reason is that most American policy elites still believe the United States needs to dominate the Middle East, and that Israeli military assertiveness is instrumentally useful to this end – a mindset the Israel lobby artfully reinforces.

Since World War II – and especially since the Cold War's end – the US political class has seen Middle Eastern hegemony as key to their country's global primacy. For two decades following Israel's creation, it contributed little to this; thus, the United States extended it virtually no military or economic assistance, beyond negligible amounts of food aid.

Washington started providing substantial assistance to Israel only after it demonstrated a unilateral capacity, in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, to capture and hold territory from Arab states allied, for the most part, with the Soviet Union. Support for Israel grew through the rest of the Cold War; after the Cold War, US policymakers doubled down on the US-Israeli “special relationship,” calculating that facilitating Israel's military superiority *vis-à-vis* its neighbours would help solidify US post-Cold War dominance over the strategically vital Middle East.

The instrumental nature of the “special relationship” also shaped what seems, from outside, Washington’s chronically ineffectual stewardship of the so-called Middle East peace process – especially in seeking a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notwithstanding rhetorical professions, neither Israel nor the US has ever wanted a two-state outcome.

Palestinian self-determination precluded

Israel’s national security strategy has long rested on a military doctrine – which Israeli officials misleadingly label “deterrence” – requiring that Israel’s military be capable of using force first, disproportionately, and whenever and wherever in its neighbourhood Israeli politicians want. Pursuing a two-state solution seriously would ultimately curb this freedom of unilateral military initiative.

Moreover, for a Zionist project with inherently religious roots, a two-state outcome would mean surrendering too much of the Jewish Biblical homeland to sustain the Jewish immigration on which Israel’s long-term future depends.

Likewise, the US never intended the peace process to help Palestinians achieve real self-determination – for that would inevitably constrain Israel’s exercise of military supremacy over its neighbourhood, attenuating America’s own drive for Middle Eastern dominance. The process has instead been conducted to empower Israel, to subordinate Palestinians and other Arabs into an increasingly militarised US sphere of influence, and to leverage Arab states’ buy-in to this scenario.

These dynamics are vividly displayed in Israeli and US approaches to Gaza. The roots of Gazans’ current trials go back to 2005, when Israel withdrew soldiers and settlers from Gaza. Widely credited with having pushed Israel to take these steps, Hamas won internationally supervised Palestinian elections the following year.

But Gaza’s occupation was far from over. While Israel had withdrawn soldiers and settlers, it hardly let Gazans exercise anything approaching sovereignty: Israel’s military continued exerting strict control over their access to the world – whether by land, sea, or air – and over flows of food, medicine, and other essential goods into their territory. For nearly a decade, this siege has eroded living conditions for 1.7 million people.

After becoming the elected governors of Gaza’s population, Hamas offered Israel a long-term truce, if Israel withdrew to pre-1967 borders. Instead of negotiating with Hamas, to consolidate a sustainable and truly self-governing entity in Gaza that could ground broader conflict resolution, Israel and the US rejected Palestinians’ electoral choice and worked in multiple ways to isolate Hamas and undermine its popularity by increasing civilian suffering in Gaza – including, in 2006, 2008-2009, and 2012, through military assaults inflicting thousands of Palestinian casualties.

In some respects, this approach “succeeded,” for a while. By this spring, Hamas was at what even ardent supporters described as its weakest point, in terms of financial resources and regional backing, since its founding. (To be sure, Hamas contributed to this by abandoning its

base in Syria and counting on Egypt's short-lived Muslim Brotherhood government to become its biggest regional backer.)

US failure

But Israel's insistence on perpetuating occupation – even without settlements – is renewing Hamas' resistance agenda. Earlier this week, after Israel accepted an Egyptian ceasefire proposal that would have done nothing to address the ongoing siege, Hamas made its own proposal: a ten-year truce, including a comprehensive ceasefire – if Israel met a set of ten demands.

Among them: opening all land crossings into Gaza, lifting the naval blockade, establishing an international airport and a seaport, freeing all prisoners arrested in the Israeli military's current campaign, and committing not to re-enter Gaza for a decade.

Israel, of course, is not about to accede to any of this. And so the world waits to see if a ceasefire can be brokered, or whether Israel's military, after bombing at least 1,800 sites in Gaza since July 8, is mounting a “boots on the ground” operation there which, Israeli officials warn, could last “many months.”

Among this situation's many tragic aspects, one is particularly galling: After strategically failed interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and (by proxy) Syria, it is abundantly evident that Washington's quest to dominate the Middle East has not just failed. This quest has sapped US capacity to shape positive strategic outcomes in the region and, at least in relative terms, weakened the United States as a global player. Looking ahead, the experience of the Arab Awakening casts further doubt on the long-term plausibility of co-opting unrepresentative Arab governments into a US-led regional order that, among other things, enshrines Israel's perpetual military ascendancy. Yet, US policy elites stick with their hegemonic script.

The alternatives to Washington's failed quest for hegemony are twofold: to shift US strategy towards cultivating a stable balance of power in the Middle East and to promote greater reliance on international law and institutions as contributors to regional and global stability. Either or both would compel fundamental revision of US posture towards Israel.

Cultivating a stable regional balance will take serious engagement with all relevant actors, including those (Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran) that seek to constrain Israel through both hard and soft power. It will also require the United States to stop enabling Israel's unfettered freedom of military initiative, which contributes to regional instability. Similarly, promoting international legal frameworks as strategic stabilisers is meaningless unless Washington stops shielding Israel from the political consequences of thwarting them – whether by regularly violating international humanitarian law or by opting out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and developing the region's only indigenous nuclear arsenal.

Unfortunately for Gaza's people and US interests, the US political class remains deeply resistant to these imperatives.