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The Road Back From Hell

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Each day the Israel-Gaza war continues, the risks of a cataclysm intensify.

After Israel's horrific loss of over 1,400 civilians and soldiers on Oct. 7, the civilian death toll of Palestinians in Gaza is now nothing short of staggering. More than 10,300 Palestinians have been killed since the beginning of the war, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, including [over 4,100 children](#). Conditions are deteriorating fast in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, with at least 155 Palestinians killed, over 2,150 arrested and threats of ethnic cleansing being voiced by Israeli political and settler leaders.

In the north, relatively measured daily exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah could explode into a full-blown conflict any day, engulfing much of Lebanon and Israel. The ramped-up U.S. military deployment in the region may be framed as preventive, but it also signals to Israel's leaders that it can drag America into this war — a risky addition to calculations, miscalculations and unpredictability all around. The wider regional conflagration is already here. The question is how bad it will get.

A vast majority of global leaders and all Arab leaders have [demanded an immediate cease-fire](#), recognizing the danger of a metastasizing crisis, as have the heads of [18 U.N. agencies](#). The nations opposing a cease-fire — Israel, the United States, some European countries and a few others — might acknowledge the perils looming. But they insist that after Oct. 7, Israel must be allowed to militarily eliminate Hamas and should be supported in that quest, despite the unconscionable and growing cost in civilian life.

But there are two important ideas that could get us out of this war — both in the short term and in the long term.

In the near term, a suspension of hostilities should be seized on as the offramp leading to a permanent cessation.

So far, Israel has rebuffed the notion. Even the U.S. calls last week for a limited humanitarian pause in the fighting in Gaza, while wholly insufficient in scope, were quickly rejected by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

From the early days of the crisis, Qatar has been mediating behind-the-scenes negotiations with Israel, Hamas and the United States for a deal to secure the release of Israelis and others being held in Gaza. Last month an agreement was close to being finalized, according to

current and former officials in three of the involved regional capitals, for the release of all civilian women, children, older adults and the sick in exchange for a five-day cessation of hostilities and to allow more humanitarian assistance to enter Gaza. Israel nixed that deal by launching its ground incursion.

Seeing more people freed in a deal could invigorate popular demand in Israel to prioritize the release of the rest of those being held in Gaza. That, in tandem with a time-limited cessation, could build international momentum and external pressure for Israel to end its bombardment of Gaza. The United States would need to push for such an outcome, working alongside Qatar and regional states that have Israel's ear. The visit by the C.I.A. director, Bill Burns, [to Israel and Qatar](#) this week suggests a revamping of talks for a prisoner release package. If Mr. Netanyahu continues to hold out, other members of his war cabinet or governing coalition might be persuadable, even if it means seeing him replaced in favor of new or caretaker leadership with Knesset approval.

In the long term, the Israeli government's commitment to destroying Hamas risks becoming another unobtainable holy grail. One thing Oct. 7 made strikingly clear was that Israel cannot provide security for its citizens by controlling millions of Palestinians, who are denied their rights and freedoms and live under a system of permanent structural violence and inequality. The "no cease-fire" crowd must desist from encouraging Israel to hang on to the historically discredited fiction that armed resistance rooted in an oppressed people can be eliminated by the deployment of even more ferocious military methods.

Israel's failure to offer detailed plans for postwar Gaza indicates the degree of dysfunction in Israeli thinking. The oft-stated Israeli leadership commitment to destroying Hamas ignores the reality of what that movement is. Hamas is an armed group that uses terrorism and is a political movement that has won elections and has been governing Gaza for more than 15 years. It also embodies an idea — namely that resistance is part of the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Hamas is not an external, ISIS-style nihilistic cadre; it is deeply embedded in the fabric of Palestinian society. Its popularity surely increases not with a thirst for blood but rather as other avenues for achieving liberation are closed to Palestinians.

Moreover, the alternative offered by the Palestinian Authority, sustained via security cooperation with Israel, has been discredited in the eyes of most Palestinians by the entrenchment and intensification of Israeli occupation, including a more than fourfold increase in illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank since the Oslo process began.

Palestinians can no longer avoid dealing with the legitimacy deficit in their leadership, which lacks credibility, representativeness and a strategy for achieving freedom. Both the Palestine Liberation Organization and its subsidiary, the Palestinian Authority, need to be renewed and expanded to increase their inclusivity, including but not limited to Hamas representation in the P.L.O. Revived Palestinian national political structures will be a critical component in advancing broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution after this war.

That may sound like a pipe dream. How can Israel be expected to engage, even indirectly, with a political body in which Hamas is represented? The hard truth is that this is precisely what coming to terms with ugly, violent, protracted conflict looks like. There is a path to Israeli security, and it entails security and rights for Palestinians. Previous Israeli governments [eventually talked to](#) the once-banned P.L.O. Any future government that is

serious about a way forward will have to engage with a reformed P.L.O. in which Hamas is represented.

Nations that have come out against a cease-fire may believe they are cheering Israel on to a righteous victory, but Israel's current course only ensures its perpetual instability. Hamas is not the existential threat that Israel thinks it is, but Israel's overreach and extremism might just be. It has been said many times that what Israel needs from its friends and supporters is to be pulled back from the precipice. America's guaranteeing of Israeli impunity and unwillingness to meaningfully address Palestinian suffering has for too long failed Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Oct. 7 and its aftermath can be a catalyst for the previously unthinkable — for good and for bad.

The road back from the hell of a zero-sum “us or them” begins with the humanizing of the other. Maybe it's a road that eventually leads us back to a two-state dispensation. Or maybe the partition paradigm is part of the problem, encouraging separation and the idea that walls must exist between Palestinians and Israelis. There are no quick or easy solutions. But if our nightmares emerged in failing to anticipate and prevent the horrors of Oct. 7 and every day since, then perhaps it is time to unleash our political imagination in laying the groundwork for a future of life and hope.

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