

How to End the Civil War in Israel-Palestine

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How does it end? How should it end?

How does the war initiated by the Hamas massacre at dawn on Oct. 7 end? One never knows how a war ends, let alone when. In Gaza, there have been several wars since Israel pulled out and destroyed its settlements in 2005. None prevented the devastation wrought by the next one. Further back, no one could predict that Gaza would be occupied by Israel in 1967. [And in 1948, when](#) 200,000 refugees of the 800,000 Palestinians uprooted north of Gaza found shelter in the narrow green strip between two deserts, where only 80,000 lived before the war, [most thought](#) they would be able to return home within a few weeks.

We know how both parties would like the war to end, in the context of what is feasible: for Israel, the destruction of Hamas, meaning its inability to ever launch another war, together with

the killing of as many of its members and leaders as possible. We also know how Hamas would like it to end, to fight the Israelis and inflict as many casualties as possible, and an eventual halt to hostilities with them in continued control of all or part of the strip. This would mark Hamas's acknowledgement among Palestinians as the central if not sole interlocutor for the future of Palestine.

With the positions so far apart, the hostilities will continue with varying fits and intensities, and the repeat of large-scale suffering and massacres. The current disagreement is over "a limited humanitarian pause" (for the Israeli government, at the time of its choice) or a lasting cease-fire ([advocated by Hamas](#) to operate immediately and enduringly).

If Israel pursues a full-scale ground invasion of Gaza, with the complications wrought by the presence of civilian and military prisoners taken by Hamas on Oct. 7, the continuation of hostilities is an assured recipe for more deaths on both sides. So long as the guns have not gone silent, the likelihood grows of a brutal war devolving into wide-scale regional violence. Even if the Israeli army subdues the entirety of Gaza again, and Hamas's rule is ended, Israel will be confronted by a devastation even worse than that which has existed in the Gaza Strip since 1948.

I propose to reframe the conflict as a century-old civil war over Israel-Palestine. This reading helps us better understand why the solution is elusive and how best to seek the accommodation of two people fighting over the same land. In the short term, I consider the usefulness of a lasting cease-fire emerging from the agreed pause or pauses, the accelerated freeing of all civilian hostages with a lasting cease-fire that halts the killings on all fronts, and [the use of the Geneva Convention to protect](#) combatants as prisoners of war. The atmosphere of convergence over nonviolence as the exclusive means forward can then develop in a meeting of all Israeli and Palestinian factions under a U.S.-led regional or international process to seek an end to the conflict under the two-sovereign-states banner, or one federalized system. A two-state solution is bound to include windows of cooperation projected into a common future based on mutual interests. These windows derive from a territorial continuum—with federal or other constitutional arrangements—"from the sea to the river" where proximity and commonality between the two peoples are privileged over deep mutual wounds with which they will both have to reckon.

The Possibilities

As the guns fall silent during the "[pause](#)" agreed to by the Israeli Council of Ministers on the morning of Nov. 22 for the release of prisoners on both sides, there is a window of opportunity for this temporary cease-fire to be repeated and enlarged until a more solid one is agreed or imposed.

This is the more hopeful scenario. It may not come to pass if both parties' positions harden. The descent into violence will increase qualitatively as the Israeli assault on Gaza continues or extends. This is why [the rising toll of civilian casualties in the West Bank](#) and [on the northern border](#) is ominous. In Jerusalem and the West Bank, the imbrication of populations full of hatred toward each other is thornier than ever. In the North, it is not so much the function of a battle-hardened Hezbollah as it is the open-endedness that comes with a fuller deflagration waiting to

happen. A larger conflict may not even start in South Lebanon. Ruling Houthis [lob missiles](#) from Yemen, and the [most significant Shiite constituency in Iraq](#) can mobilize [thousands of determined fighters](#). In an Israel-Iran war, the casualties would not be limited to air or missile bombardments. The fire would also engulf the full land continuum from Tehran to Mt. Hermon. [Nor can the United States remain](#) in the position of mere observer if the conflict escalates regionally. Western military outposts, as well as more innocent civilians, will be targeted across the region and beyond. Despite the active diplomacy to limit the war to Gaza, the absence of a cease-fire keeps the armageddon spiral a present and developing danger.

There are other readings of the war's potential, no doubt, but any optimism about them is short sighted, including the one rosiest for Israel, the reoccupation of Gaza with limited Israeli casualties. For such success can only be the result of a nightmare: The deaths of Gaza will mount into the tens, possibly hundreds of thousands; several Israeli captives will be killed or die in the bombardments, and even if the war miraculously ends, redoubled hatred promises many further conflicts. In this spread of likely scenarios, the last victim of the wars in Palestine is not yet born. We should give this not-yet-born Palestinian or Israeli child a chance. This is where the question of how the war should end matters.

Oct. 7 and its aftermath are a wake-up call to all. The Palestinian plight will not go away, and a sliver of common sense beckons in the fog of war. Without ending the cycle of violence and its global repercussions, the deaths on both sides will be in vain. It is by reference to an iconic picture of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, where a building in Beirut was filmed crumbling in one fell swoop after being hit by an Israeli bomb, that [Osama bin Laden said he got his idea to bring down the Twin Towers on Sept. 11](#). An outcome that reverses the spiral downward since the first serious clash between the Jewish and Arab Palestinian communities in [1908](#) commands a clear objective: the end of the conflict over Israel-Palestine. No more small steps, tit-for-tat killings, regional scapegoating, and petty zero-sum gains.

Historical Analogies

The closest analogy to the current conflict is Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. At the time, the Israeli and American governments considered the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as an evil terrorist group to be destroyed, and the siege and occupation of Beirut succeeded in expelling its leadership, at a crime-of-humanity cost known as [Sabra and Shatila](#). In Gaza, the Israeli army might succeed in splitting the territory durably in two—perhaps even reoccupy northern Gaza and then the southern part of the strip, and force as many Gazans as possible to flee. The bombardments would continue until the whole territory was subdued. If part or all of the population flees toward Egypt, so much the better for the Israeli government. They will not be allowed back. This also holds true if the clashes continue to rise and Palestinians are expelled from the West Bank. And if the northern front blows up further, Israel will not remain content with the unstable deterrence that followed the end of hostilities in July 2006. What appeared as a draw, with both sides back to their positions, has from the Israeli perspective allowed Hezbollah to develop its domination of Lebanon and acquire more significant firepower; it would likely invade Lebanese territory and [establish the equivalent of a North Bank in South Lebanon](#).

On the Palestinian side, there will be no surrender in Gaza. During the Lebanese invasion in June 1982, one telling episode is documented in Zeev Schiff and Ehud Yaari's [memorable book](#) as "the snag at Sidon." In the first week of the war, Palestinian and Lebanese Islamic resistance refused to surrender in the southern city of Sidon, probably causing the largest number of casualties of the war among the Israeli soldiers. But the Palestinians, including the PLO, did not have the support of the Lebanese population. In Gaza, even though Palestinians' claims are not the same as those being made by Hamas, there will be no Gazan, and no Palestinian, to tell Hamas off. The position of no surrender in Gaza comes from the irredentist style of Hamas, whose leaders have been assassinated time and again by Israel. It comes also from the desperate plight afflicting Gazans generally, about [80 percent of whom](#) are refugees from 1948 and their descendants.

The regional configuration is also radically different from previous wars. In 1982, the extension of the war with a logistical depth reaching Tehran failed because [Saddam Hussein was not prepared to offer passage to Ruhollah Khomeini's armies](#) without the latter's readiness to end the Iraq-Iran war, which the Iraqi president was then losing. Today, the presence of the [U.S. Army at the Syria-Iraq border](#) is not sufficient to prevent a steady stream of hundreds of thousands of fighters joining in by land, all the way from the Iranian Afghanistan-Pakistan border to the Golan and southern Lebanon. Nor is the Arab and Sunni world likely to remain on the outside of the conflict as the war turns increasingly global. For there is little doubt that horrors will be exacted on innocent populations elsewhere. The prodromes can be seen on the streets of [Paris](#) and [New York](#), or at the [Dagestan airport](#). The atmosphere regionally and internationally was nowhere as polarized as it is today. Even if the Palestinian side does not seek such planet-wide shocks, it will do nothing to oppose it.

Ending a Civil War

Merely understanding the context of the current conflict does not resolve the challenge of conceptualizing war, plagued in its definition in the modern world by the absence of formal war declarations, asymmetry, and "total war" engulfing the whole population concerned. I suggest civil war as the most adequate term for the century-old conflict over historic Palestine, of which the most recent iteration is unfolding in Gaza.

The war in Gaza is the latest in the ongoing and uninterrupted civil war over the land of Israel-Palestine between "[two peoples over one land](#)." There have already been several limited wars in Gaza. Nor did the war start in the two intifadas in 1987 and in 2000, or in the Lebanese wars of 2006, or 1982, or 1973, or 1967, or 1956, or even in 1948. Bloodshed between the two peoples [has recurred cyclically since the 1920s](#).

Of course the war over Palestine often turns regional, or even expands further. We were even close to a [nuclear world war between Americans and Soviets in 1973](#). Some view the conflict as a "colonial fact," a position taken by French historian Maxime Rodinson in a [long essay](#) written just before the 1967 Six-Day War, and restated as a "[late colonial fact](#)" in 2003 by Tony Judt, historian at New York University. Columbia historian Rashid Khalidi [reminds](#) us that the reading of the conflict as colonial does not meet the test of the needed colonial metropole. The war can

also be perceived as a clash of civilizations between East and West, or as a fracture between North and South.

Against all of these readings, my preferred choice of the term “civil war” is prospective rather than retrospective. Once the conflict is recast as yet another episode of a century-old civil war, how to end it becomes clearer, even if a civil war never ends easily. When the goal is the total defeat of the other side, the result can be one of the most tragic episodes of history. A less tragic end is possible only when both communities at war are conscious of the horrific consequences inherent to the annihilation of the other group.

While trying to end the longest civil and regional war in modern history, throwing at each other founding charters, constitutions, and accusations of existential illegitimacy does not help. Israelis’ right to defend themselves does not trump Palestinians’ right to defend themselves. In historical terms, the Israeli side anchors the claim of Jews of ancestral rights to the biblical land. Palestinians advance their entitlement in anti-colonial terms and native property rights. Both purportedly exclude any entitlement to the land by the other side.

The broader conflict must come to an end by first resolving the current conflict. The “first pause” agreed to on Nov. 22 should be followed by a more significant set of pauses. These pauses should be accompanied by a series of successive releases of prisoners culminating in a more lasting cease-fire, which should then be strengthened by the gradual release of all prisoners of war on both sides—as proposed above. This resolution will serve as a foundation for ending the civil war with as wide a constituency of supportive parties as possible, all premised on Palestinians and Israelis at the core deciding together on a better future for their children.

The shape of the necessary compromise as an alternative to the continuation of the civil war is clear enough: the division of the land in two states, or the change of the constitutional regime across historic Palestine into equal citizenship under the rule of law. Present Israel is, de facto, a binational state. The question is whether to divide the territory it controls with the creation of an adjacent State of Palestine, or to work toward a change of the Israeli constitutional regime into one sovereign state—[which could be federal](#) or not—to ensure equality between citizens and between the two peoples.

New thinking requires a revolution in the mind nourished by a shift in our common lexicon. More concretely, it requires the realistic but ambitious drawing of a stable end-map supported by a large nonviolent movement in Israel-Palestine, which will be encouraged by worldwide support. Only at the price of a nonviolent revolution in our thoughts and acts can we avoid Gaza’s horror extended or repeated.

This momentous shift is best ushered in with an international conference that includes all the parties at the core of the civil war if they accept nonviolence as the exclusive means toward a solution. To end the civil war, the meeting will need on board all Jewish Israelis, together with all Palestinians: the Arab Israelis who call themselves “Palestinians in Israel,” the Jerusalemites, West Bankers, Gazans, and the exiles/refugees. One does not need to be bogged down with who represents Israelis, however distasteful to many Israelis the Netanyahu government has become,

or who represents the Palestinians, regardless of the deep controversies over Hamas within Palestine and abroad. Each party will sort out its own preferred representation.

The objective of the conference is to end the century-old civil and regional wars over historic Palestine with an agreement between Palestinians and Israelis to live together, either side-by-side in separate sovereign and democratic states along the pre-1967 war or the armistice lines of 1949, or in one united democratic country, possibly federal, over the whole territory between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

Involvement of the United Nations is not necessary and might only complicate matters. As for the regional powers, they should be included so long as their commitment is to a nonviolent resolution drawing on either of the two possible solutions just described. However controversial, this includes Iran. The commitment to the rejection of all forms of violence during an open conference is a sine qua non for its success.

My hope is for the process to be initiated and led by President Biden whom I briefly met once on Capitol Hill as a human rights “comrade in non-arms.” Whatever the immense controversy in the Palestinian and Middle Eastern milieu presently associated with Biden’s unwavering support of Israel, his longtime familiarity with the conflict as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s sensitivity to universal human rights come off clearly in their repeated statements about the two-state solution, as well as their commitment to humanitarian pauses and their firm rejection of the extension of the conflict to the West Bank and the northern front. These positions do not fundamentally differ with the proposal of this brief paper. It is the sense of urgency, clarity of mind, and commitment to nonviolence that are needed at the helm.