FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Israel's Forever War

The Long History of Managing—Rather Than Solving—the Conflict

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To Israelis, October 7, 2023, is the worst day in their country's 75-year history. Never before have so many of them been massacred and taken hostage on a single day. Thousands of heavily armed Hamas fighters managed to break through the Gaza Strip's fortified border and into Israel, rampaging unimpeded for hours, destroying several villages, and committing gruesome acts of brutality before Israeli forces could regain control. Israelis have compared the attack to the Holocaust; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has described Hamas as "the new Nazis." In response, the Israel Defense Forces have pursued an open-ended military campaign in Gaza driven by rage and the desire for revenge. Netanyahu promises that the IDF will fight Hamas until it achieves "total victory," although even his own military has been hard put to define what this means. He has offered no clear idea of what should happen when the fighting stops, other than to

assert that Israel must maintain security control of all of Gaza and the West Bank.

For Palestinians, the Gaza war is the worst event they have experienced in 75 years. Never have so many of them been killed and uprooted since the *nakba*, the catastrophe that befell them during Israel's war of independence in 1948, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to give up their homes and became refugees. Like the Israelis, they also point to terrible acts of violence: by late March, Israel's military campaign had taken the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinians, among them thousands of children, and rendered well over a million homeless. As the Palestinians see it, the Israeli offensive is part of a larger plan to incorporate all Palestinian lands into the Jewish state and get them to abandon Gaza entirely—an idea that has in fact been raised by some members of Netanyahu's government. The Palestinians also hold on to the illusion of return, the principle that they will one day be able to reclaim their historic homes in Israel itself—a kind of Palestinian Zionism that, like Israel's maximalist aspirations, can never come true.

Ever since the first Zionists began to conceive of a Jewish homeland in Palestine in the late nineteenth century, Jewish leaders and their Arab counterparts have understood that an all-encompassing settlement between them was likely impossible. As early as 1919, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's future first prime minister, recognized that there could be no peace in Palestine. Both the Jews and the Arabs, he observed, were claiming the land for themselves, and both were doing so as nations. "There is no solution to this question," he repeatedly declared. "There is an abyss between us, and nothing can fill that abyss." The inevitable conflict, he concluded, could at best be managed—limited or contained, perhaps, but not resolved.

In the months since the October 7 attacks, critics of Netanyahu, noting his efforts to bolster Hamas and his push for Arab normalization deals that sideline the Palestinian issue, have accused him of trying to manage the conflict rather than end it. But that complaint misreads history. Netanyahu's cardinal blunder was not his attempt to parry the issues that divide Jews and Arabs. It was that he did so more incompetently—and with more disastrous consequences—than anyone else over the past century. Indeed, conflict management is the only real option that either side, and their international interlocutors, has ever had. From its beginnings, the conflict has always been perpetuated by religion and mythology—violent fundamentalism and messianic prejudices, fantasies and symbols, and deep-rooted anxieties—rather than by concrete interests and calculated strategies. The irrational nature of the conflict has been the main reason why it could never be resolved. Only by confronting this enduring reality can world leaders begin to approach a crisis that demands not more empty talk of solutions for the future but urgent action to better cope with the present.

THIS LAND IS MY LAND

Not far from the grave of Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, on the mountain in Jerusalem that bears his name, is a national memorial to generations of Jewish victims of terrorism. The monument reflects an Israeli tendency to try to prove that Jews were persecuted by Arabs in Palestine long before the first Zionists set foot there. The earliest victim mentioned is a Jew from Lithuania who was killed by an Arab in 1851 after a financial dispute, and the eviction of some Arabs, related to the rebuilding of a synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem. The memorial also mentions several Jewish victims of Arab robberies and 13 Jews who were killed in British bombing raids on Palestine during World War I. Palestinian historiography and commemorative culture rely on a similarly tendentious use of history.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, fewer than 7,000 Jews were living in Palestine, making up about 2.5 percent of the population of what was then an Ottoman province. Some of their communities had been there for many centuries. As more Arabs and Jews migrated there, the territory's population grew, and with it the relative proportion of Jews. Most Arabs came from neighboring countries in search of employment. Most of the Jews came for religious reasons and as refugees from pogroms in Eastern Europe, and they tended to settle in the Old City of Jerusalem. These immigrants had no intention of establishing Jewish statehood in Palestine. In fact, most Jews at the time did not believe in the Zionist ideology, and many of them even opposed secular Zionism on religious grounds.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were about half a million Arabs in Palestine, whereas the number of Jews, although it had increased steadily, was around 50,000, or about one-tenth of the population. Nonetheless, Herzl's international activities, including a visit in 1898 to Jerusalem, where he was received by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, began to worry leaders of the Palestinian Arabs.

The following year, Yusuf Diya al-Khalidi, the mayor of Jerusalem, expressed his concerns about the Zionists in a remarkable letter written to the chief rabbi of France. "Who could contest the rights of the Jews in Palestine?" Khalidi began in polite, even sympathetic, French prose. "My God, historically it is your country!" But that history was now deep in the past, he continued. "Palestine is an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, and more gravely, it is inhabited by others," Khalidi wrote. The world was big enough, with plenty of uninhabited land for Jewish independence, he concluded.

"For God's sake—let Palestine be left alone!" Herzl, who received the letter from the French chief rabbi, assured Khalidi in his reply that the Zionists

would develop the land for the benefit of all inhabitants, including the Arabs. Previously, however, he had written that the Zionist project might require the resettlement of poor Palestinians to neighboring countries.

Around the time of Herzl's death, in 1904, young Zionists, mostly socialists from Eastern Europe, began to come to Palestine. One was David Gruen, who later changed his name to David Ben-Gurion. Born in Poland, he arrived in 1906 at the age of 20 and joined a Jewish workers' group in the Galilee. His first political activity was the promotion of "Hebrew labor"—an attempt to require Jewish employers to hire Jews rather than Arabs. At the time, the Zionists' acquisition of land also led to the dispossession of some Arab agricultural workers, some of whom reacted violently. In the spring of 1909, Ben-Gurion's settlement was attacked, and two of his fellow members were killed, one of them apparently in front of Ben-Gurion. The future prime minister of Israel concluded that the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs had irreconcilable differences; there was no escaping the conflict.

Ben-Gurion's attitude toward the Arabs was further shaped by two other experiences. During World War I, he was expelled from Palestine by the Ottoman authorities. On one of his last days in Jerusalem, he ran into a young Arab with whom he had studied in Istanbul. When Ben-Gurion reported that he was about to be expelled, his acquaintance replied that as his dear friend, he was deeply sorry for him, but as an Arab nationalist, he was very happy. "That was the first time in my life that I heard an honest answer from an Arab intellectual," Ben-Gurion said. "His words burned themselves into my heart, very, very deeply." Years later, Ben-Gurion had a conversation with Musa Alami, a prominent Arab Palestinian and politician. Ben-Gurion promised as usual that the Zionists would develop Palestine for all its inhabitants. According to Ben-Gurion, Alami replied that he would

rather leave the land poor and desolate for another century, if need be, until the Arabs could develop it themselves.

Ben-Gurion often dismissed the "easy solutions" that he attributed to some of his colleagues, such as the notion that Jews could be encouraged to learn Arabic or even that Jews and Arabs could live together in one state. They were refusing to acknowledge the facts. Ben-Gurion's own concept of the Jewish future in Palestine was based simply on acquiring as much land as possible, if not necessarily the entire territory, and populating it with as many Jews and as few Arabs as possible. His views about the conflict remained unchanged to the end of his life and continuously informed his efforts to manage it.

SWITZERLAND IN JUDEA

In 1917, the Zionist movement achieved one of its most important successes when British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour declared the United Kingdom to be in favor of establishing a "national home" for the Jewish people in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration, as it became known, was part of a strategic British plan to take the Holy Land from Ottoman dominion. In reality, like almost everything to do with that land, Balfour's policy was driven more by sentimental religious ideas than by rational statecraft. A staunch Christian Zionist, Balfour was committed to the idea that the people of God should return to their homeland after a 2,000-year exile so that they could fulfill their biblical destiny. He aspired to go down in history as the man who made this messianic transformation possible.

As was often the case with Western officials at the time, Balfour's apparent reverence for the Jews simultaneously drew on deep anti-Semitic prejudice. Like others of his era, he attributed almost unlimited power and influence to "the Jew," including an ability to determine history and even convince the

United States to enter World War I. (It was hoped that the Balfour Declaration would sway American Jews to push the United States to join the Allied powers in the war.)

By the end of 1917, the United Kingdom had conquered Palestine, thus beginning nearly 30 years of British rule. During this period, the Zionist movement laid the political, economic, cultural, and military foundations for the future state of Israel. Tensions with the Arabs increased over the years as hundreds of thousands of new Jewish immigrants, mainly from Europe, continued to arrive. In the 1920s, these immigrants were motivated not by support for Zionism but by the severe new immigration restrictions imposed by the United States. In the 1930s, more than 50,000 Jewish refugees arrived in Palestine from Nazi Germany, although in less desperate circumstances most of them would have preferred to stay in their country.

Large-scale immigration of Jews sparked more waves of Arab violence against Jews and against the British authorities, who were seen as supporting Zionist aims. This came to a head in the Arab revolt of 1936–39, in which Palestinians rose up against the British colonial administration through a general strike, an armed insurrection, and attacks on railways and Jewish settlements. Amid this turmoil, the British began to regard Palestine as a nuisance. To get rid of the problem, they appointed the so-called Peel Commission, which recommended dividing the land into Jewish and Arab states—the very first "two-state" solution.

Although the Jewish state it envisioned was small, amounting to just 17 percent of British Mandate Palestine, Ben-Gurion supported the plan. Notably, Arab inhabitants of the area designated for the Jewish state were to be transferred to the Arab state, a provision that he described in his diary as a "forced transfer," drawing a thick line under the words. Most of his

colleagues, however, wanted much more land for the Jewish state, setting off a contentious debate between the center-left Zionist leadership and right-wing "Revisionists" who cultivated a dream of a Greater Israel on both banks of the Jordan River. Although they stood to gain control of about 75 percent of the land, the Arabs rejected the idea of a Jewish state in principle, and the British withdrew the plan. Here, again, was the "abyss" between Jews and Arabs that Ben-Gurion had identified years earlier and that would become even deeper after the Holocaust and the war of 1948.

In January 1942, a few weeks before Nazi leaders met at the infamous Wannsee Conference to discuss the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," *Foreign Affairs* published an article by the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. At the time, no one outside Germany knew about the Nazis' planned extermination camps, but their treatment of Jews in occupied Western Europe and during Germany's ruthless assault on the Soviet Union had already made clear that the Nazis were threatening the existence of the entire Jewish people. Only total victory over the Third Reich could halt the extermination of the Jews, and although Weizmann expressed a hope that a better world could be built after the war, his article was an urgent appeal for a Jewish homeland. Palestine, he wrote, was the only place where Jews, particularly Jewish refugees, could survive.

From a Zionist perspective, Weizmann's proposal contained elements of compromise: more than 20 years earlier, at the Versailles peace conference after World War I, he had presented a map of the Land of Israel with biblical borders that extended to the east bank of the Jordan River—territory much larger than the country would ever attain. In his article, by contrast, Weizmann did not specify borders but proposed unlimited Jewish immigration to a democratic country that would offer equal rights to all its

inhabitants, including Arabs. Although he wrote that the Arabs must be "clearly told that the Jews will be encouraged to settle in Palestine, and will control their own immigration," he asserted that Arabs would not be discriminated against and would "enjoy full autonomy in their own internal affairs." He also did not rule out the possibility that the new Jewish state could join "in federation" with neighboring Arab states. But like Ben-Gurion, he also foresaw the need to contain the Palestinian Arabs: should they wish, he wrote, "every facility will be given to them to transfer to one of the many and vast Arab countries."

Attempting to convince his readers that the Jews were worthy of help, Weizmann somewhat pathetically promised that "the Jew" no longer fit the anti-Semitic stereotypes that were prevalent in the West before the start of the Zionist project. "When the Jew is reunited with the soil of Palestine," he wrote, "energies are released" that if "given an outlet, can create values which may be of service even to richer and more fortunate countries." Weizmann compared the hoped-for Zionist state to Switzerland, "another small country, also poor in natural resources," that had nevertheless become "one of the most orderly and stable of European democracies." Seven years later, he was elected the first president of Israel. In the meantime, the Nazis had murdered six million Jews.

UNREALIZED GAINS

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly recommended the partition of Palestine, this time in a division that would give each side broadly equitable areas of land, with the Old City of Jerusalem under international control. The Arabs rejected the plan, in accordance with their traditional objection to Jewish statehood in Palestine. The Zionists accepted partition, although Ben-Gurion expected war and hoped that it would end with territory that was empty of Arabs.

Soon afterward, Arab militias began a series of attacks on the Jewish population, and Zionist groups retaliated with actions against Arab communities. In May 1948, Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence. It was a dangerous gamble. Regular Arab armies and volunteers from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Transjordan were about to invade the new country, and top commanders of the Jewish armed forces warned that the odds of defeating them were even at best. U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall demanded an immediate cease-fire; Ben-Gurion feared that the Zionists were not ready for war. Before the UN partition plan was announced, he had tried in vain to persuade the British to stay in Palestine for five to ten more years, which could have given the Jews more time to increase immigration and strengthen their forces.

But faced with the historic opportunity to declare a Jewish state, Ben-Gurion chose to obey a Zionist imperative that he said had guided him since the age of three. He later explained that the Israelis won not because they were better at fighting but because the Arabs were even worse. In keeping with his abiding view that establishing a Jewish majority was more important than gaining territory, he led the army to push out or expel most of the Arabs—some 750,000—who fled to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, which Ben-Gurion left unoccupied, as well as to neighboring Arab countries. A direct line could be traced from the Zionists' campaign in the 1920s to replace Arab workers with Jews to the far larger effort in 1948 to remove Arabs from the land of the new Jewish state. Israel lost close to 6,000 soldiers in that war, nearly one percent of the new country's Jewish population at the time.

When the war ended in early 1949, green pencils were used to draw armistice boundaries between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the famous "Green Line." Gaza became an Egyptian protectorate, and the West Bank

was annexed by Jordan. Israel now controlled more territory than it had been allocated in the UN partition plan. It was also almost free of Arabs; the ones who remained were subjected to a rather arbitrary and often corrupt military rule. Most Israelis at the time saw this as an acceptable situation—a rational way of managing the conflict. The Arabs in turn considered Israel's existence a humiliation that had to be remedied. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, authorities did not allow Palestinian refugees to be integrated into their new countries of residence, forcing them instead to live in temporary camps, where they were encouraged to nurture the idea of return.

In the first two decades after independence, Israel made remarkable achievements. But it failed to reach the Zionist goal of providing the entire Jewish people with a safe national homeland. Most of the world's Jews, including many survivors of the Holocaust, still preferred to remain in other countries; those in the Soviet Union and other communist countries were forbidden to emigrate by the authorities in those places. After the 1948 war, most Middle Eastern Jews, many of whose families had been in the region for thousands of years, no longer felt safe in Muslim countries and chose—or were forced—to leave. Most settled in Israel, at first often as destitute refugees. By the mid-1960s, immigrants who had arrived since independence made up around 60 percent of the Israeli population. Most had not yet mastered the Hebrew language, and they often disagreed on basic values and even on how to define a Jew.

Ben-Gurion continued to manage the conflict, but many Israelis, particularly newcomers, felt that Israel's existence was still in danger. Only a few close confidants knew about Ben-Gurion's nuclear project. Border wars frequently broke out; the IDF prepared contingency plans for the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. During the Suez crisis of 1956, Israeli forces invaded Egypt, occupying Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula, but

withdrew a few months later. In a cabinet meeting, Ben-Gurion said that if he believed in miracles, he would ask for Gaza to be swallowed up by the sea.

After Ben-Gurion resigned in 1963, Israelis were left with a weak and hesitant leadership and a deep economic crisis. More and more of them began to lose confidence in Israel's future. In 1966, the number of Jews emigrating from the country exceeded the number entering it. A popular joke referred to a sign supposedly hanging at the exit gate of the international airport that read: "Would the last person to leave the country please turn off the lights?"

LAND FOR WAR

By the mid-1960s, a new generation of Palestinian refugees had grown up on the legacy of the *nakba* and the dream of return. They founded the Palestine Liberation Organization, a movement that declared a war to free Palestinians and establish an Arab state encompassing their entire historical land, and began carrying out attacks on military and civilian targets in Israel. Some Palestinian militants infiltrated Israel from Syria and Jordan. Israel responded with military reprisals, and in May 1967, Egyptian officials openly threatened to "annihilate" Israel. As tensions rose, many Israelis doubted that their country could survive, and the weariest ones relived their Holocaust experiences. Playgrounds around the country were hastily prepared to serve as burial grounds for the tens of thousands of the expected dead. Israel's decision to attack Egypt in June 1967 was not only a preemptive strike but also an act of nightmarish panic.

But the surprise attack, launching what would come to be called the Six-Day War, resulted in a dramatic victory for the IDF. Within hours, the Egyptian air force had been destroyed on the ground, and Israelis' existential

dread was replaced by an almost uncontrolled triumphalism. Led by Revisionist opposition leader Menachem Begin, who had joined Israel's emergency cabinet on the eve of the war and would later become prime minister, as well as some other cabinet ministers, prominent Israeli politicians demanded the "liberation" of what they called Greater Israel—the biblical land that included the entire West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Such an ambition reflected national and religious feelings, but strategically it was contested. A few months before the war, senior officials from the IDF, the prime minister's office, and the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, had met to discuss the possibility that King Hussein of Jordan would be overthrown by Palestinians living in the West Bank. At the time, the Israeli leadership concluded that the king was working to eradicate Palestinian nationalism in Jordan and the West Bank and that it would be advisable, indeed almost vital, for Israel to stay out of it. After the June victory, however, none of the cabinet ministers questioned why it would be in Israel's interest to occupy land that was populated by millions of Palestinians. Having just experienced a kind of national resurrection, they were determined to acquire as much land as possible. The impulse came from the heart, not from the head.

Ben-Gurion had opposed the attack on Egypt because he feared defeat, including the destruction of Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona. After the war, he said that if he had to choose between a smaller state of Israel with peace or the newly expanded boundaries without peace, he would choose the first option. But even he could not contain his emotions when Israeli forces entered the Arab-controlled areas of Jerusalem at the beginning of the war. Shortly afterward, he demanded that the wall of the Old City immediately be torn down to ensure that Jerusalem remained "united" forever.

Taking Arab Jerusalem was a fatal decision, for neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians were likely to agree to any compromise there. There were efforts to manage this flash point, but these arrangements often broke down, and the eternal city has since remained the emotional core of insoluble conflict. The Israeli conquest of the West Bank sparked similar messianic passions, and within months, Israelis began to settle there. Only a few realized that in the long run, occupying the Palestinian territories would put Israel's Jewish majority and its shaky democracy in jeopardy. Just as there was no rational justification for the existential hysteria that had preceded the Six-Day War, there was no rational basis for the unbridled expansionism that took hold after it.

Despite Israel's victory, the 1967 war simply reinforced the underlying tensions that had long driven the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arab countries reaffirmed their refusal to recognize the existence of Israel; the Palestinians' longing for their lost homeland intensified. Every few years, another war broke out. And each side did what it could to manage a situation that had no ready answers. Egypt was able to make peace with Israel in 1979 mostly because Israel was not required to give up any part of Palestine; under a similar logic, Jordan was able to follow suit in 1994. In reaching these agreements, both Arab countries abandoned the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank, perpetuating the people's identity as the orphans of the Middle East.

CONTAINMENT OR CATASTROPHE

Like Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders, Netanyahu does not believe the conflict can be solved. But he has proved even less adept than his predecessors at managing it. In an attempt to divide and rule the Palestinians and prevent them from attaining independence, he accepted and then encouraged the Hamas takeover of Gaza. Later, he developed the

illusion that peace with some Gulf Arab states in the 2020 Abraham Accords would weaken the Palestinian cause. Implicit in these moves was the idea that it would be possible to control Hamas by bribing its leaders: Israel thus allowed Qatar to deliver Hamas millions of dollars in cash packed in suitcases. The Israeli government also issued work permits for residents of Gaza on the premise that this economic arrangement would restrain Hamas. This kind of bribery reflects a long tradition of Israeli condescension toward the Arabs—a fundamental contempt for them and their national feelings.

In reality, Hamas used much of the money to acquire thousands of rockets, some of them obtained from Iran, that were frequently fired at Israeli cities. In reaction, Israel imposed a blockade on the territory that made Gazans even poorer. Hamas organized a fighting force and constructed a web of tunnels that some experts have described as the most extensive underground fortress in the history of modern warfare. Most important, Netanyahu's approach disregarded Hamas's ideological and emotional commitments, some of which outweigh even life itself, as was illustrated by the organization's barbarity last October and in the months since. Israel has responded to this indescribable catastrophe with the vengeful devastation of Gaza and its people, a military campaign that, after more than five months, has singularly failed in its primary goal of "total victory" over Hamas.

The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict is rife with futile peace plans. These have varied from a single binational state—a concept that was first proposed by Jewish intellectuals in the 1920s, and again in the 1940s—to transforming the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan into a Palestinian state, an idea that has repeatedly resurfaced since the 1967 war. Seemingly reasonable two-state solutions have also been conceived over the years that might allow Israelis and Palestinians to control their own destinies, in some cases with

some form of international oversight of the contested holy sites in Jerusalem.

For decades, successive U.S. administrations have sponsored such initiatives, but rarely have they gotten beyond the concept stage, regardless of how favorable they might seem to one side or the other. Consider the "deal of the century," a two-state solution briefly proposed by the Trump administration in 2020. It would have left Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem largely intact and given Israel complete security control over both. Yet Jewish settlers themselves did not support it because it gave parts of the West Bank, as well as the outskirts of East Jerusalem, to the Palestinians. That "deal" was merely another iteration of an enduring fantasy. There is little reason to believe that the Biden administration's efforts to lay down a post-Gaza peace plan will be any more successful.

Historically, Israelis and Palestinians have occasionally shown a readiness to make at least some compromises. And in the early 1990s, it seemed that peace had won after all: the Oslo accords brought leaders of the two sides to the White House lawn in 1993 and subsequently earned them the Nobel Peace Prize. But even then, the results were evanescent. The following year, an Israeli fanatic massacred 29 Palestinians in a mosque in Hebron in the West Bank, setting off new waves of terrorist attacks by Palestinians. Shortly thereafter, another Israeli extremist assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—just as, after the 1979 peace accord with Israel, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had been assassinated by an Egyptian fanatic. Acts of terrorism and the rise of extremist forces on each side led to the end of the Oslo peace process, but in hindsight, the plan had never had much chance of success.

The common flaw in these international peace initiatives is a failure to contend with the inability of the Israelis and the Palestinians to embrace a lasting solution. Outside powers, including the United States, have never acted forcefully enough to stop the systematic violation of human rights in the Palestinian territories. But the primary reason the conflict endures is neither Israeli oppression of the Palestinians nor Palestinian terrorism, but rather the irrevocable commitment of both peoples to undivided land. These absolute positions have increasingly become the essence of collective identities on each side, and any compromise is likely to be denounced by significant Israeli and Palestinian constituencies as a national and religious betrayal.

Evidently, existential conflicts shaped around competing visions of nationhood cannot be ended by grand solutions that neither side will support—least of all, during the most devastating war that Israelis and Palestinians have experienced in three-quarters of a century. But such a conflict can be managed in more or less reasonable ways. If a century of failure has made clear that the two sides are unlikely to be reconciled in the foreseeable future, the war in Gaza has exposed the terrifying cataclysm that poor handling of the conflict can bring about. When the fighting is over, imaginative, resourceful, and compassionate management of the conflict between the two sides will be more crucial than ever. Rather than devoting energy and political capital to deeply unpopular—and unsustainable—peace plans, the United States and other leading powers must do more to ensure that Palestinians and Israelis can find a safer and more tolerable existence in a world without peace.

Countless failures in the search for a solution to the conflict have given rise to a hypothesis that only a catastrophe of biblical proportions could persuade either side to rethink their delusional national creeds. The

unfolding events in Israel and Gaza may suggest that both sides have not yet suffered enough. But perhaps this hypothesis is not rooted in reality, either.