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Beyond the Two-State Solution

Policy responses to the Destruction of Palestine and the Insecurity of Israel

Bob Bowker, Emma Shortis and Allan Behm, February 2025

Abstract

The January 2025 ceasefire notwithstanding, the outlook for Palestinians remains bleak. In the pursuit of Hamas's destruction—an understandably appealing but completely unrealistic objective—Israel has turned Gaza into an uninhabitable wasteland. At least 46,000 Palestinians have been killed, perhaps a majority of them women and children and non-combatants. Most of its housing and public infrastructure has been reduced to rubble. At least 1.9 million Palestinians are once again displaced.

Facing the likelihood of a continuing, mutually degrading cycle of violence in the Middle East, Australia needs to address the consequences for our interests, and for the values we uphold. In this paper, we argue that for the immediate future Australia should:

- continue to support the right of Palestinians to self-determination and statehood;
- contribute substantially to humanitarian relief (mainly through UNRWA, notwithstanding its proscription by Israel) and increase direct Australian aid;
- affirm support for the observation of international law, including supporting the findings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the enforcement of International Criminal Court (ICC) warrants by ICC members.

In doing so, however, Australia should avoid becoming trapped in the two-state paradigm. In particular, the Australian government should avoid being drawn into commitments to support, or contribute to, supposedly interim peacekeeping arrangements in pursuit of a two-state solution, when no clear path to Palestinian self-determination exists.

Above all, in responding to the situation in Gaza, and wider Middle East conflicts, Australia must maintain consistency between the democratic values we uphold at home as intrinsic to our identity, and those we seek to defend abroad.

Australia should focus on encouraging and, where possible, working with Israel and the Palestinians to create, through patient bargaining and coalition-building across existing divides, an integrated economic, political and security association that provides for equality between Jews and Palestinians.

Even without any near-term prospect of a durable solution to the question of Palestinian statehood, there is a regional and global need for the emergence of a more predictable and more stable balance between the strategic ambitions, objectives and interests of the key regional players.

Accordingly, for the longer term, it may be appropriate to consider ways of building support for the creation of a supra-national forum, across the entire Middle East, along the lines of the processes that led eventually to the formation of the European Union, where diplomacy, negotiation and mutual accommodation were designed to prevent the re-occurrence of mutual destruction. With sustained support from a future US administration, there may emerge, over time, a more conducive environment for a settlement of the Palestinian conflict between the parties themselves. Australia can, and should, play a role in supporting such long-term, genuine peacebuilding.

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Introduction

Palestine's prolonged agony and Israel's profound feelings of insecurity have combined to render a solution to the Gaza problem a practical impossibility for the foreseeable future. The engagement with Hezbollah and the expansion of the war into Lebanon, together with rocket exchanges between Tehran and Tel Aviv, have made the strategic problems even more intractable. For its part, the US has little agency and even less leverage, and the ambiguity favoured by Palestine's neighbours generate little incentive for any of the main protagonists to resolve their problems. Indeed, their leaders become ever more intransigent.

Palestine wants to be like its neighbours Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria — independent, self-governing, self-defending and a full member of the United Nations capable of entering into its own international arrangements. Israel, for its part, cannot contemplate a solution that affords any form of independent strategic, security or foreign policy power to any government that might credibly exercise sovereignty in Palestine. A Palestine that might have political independence, a robust economy, a defence capability or the ability to manage relationships with its neighbours independently is anathema to Israel. For Israel, the preferred outcome (although, in the opinion of the authors of this paper, a completely unacceptable one) is a Palestine that is little more than an occupied territory dependent on its own resources for its administration, education, health and housing services. Occupation is tantamount to oppression, motivating Palestinians to persevere with armed violence as their preferred form of protest in the belief that it is their only avenue to independence.

Palestine matters.

The centres of political, cultural and commercial exchange adjacent to the eastern Mediterranean—once referred to as the Levant—have provided a fertile strategic bridge between Europe, Africa and Asia for millennia. They still do. What is more, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea provide a strategic sea link between Europe, Asia and the Pacific. Because of continuing competition in the Middle East between major powers and other actors in a changing global and regional order, the impact of that competition on human security in the region and beyond, its connections to western societies through migration and cultural diversification, and much else besides, what happens in the Middle East more broadly matters to Australia.

Some may ask why Australia should direct any policy effort at all to a region where our immediate interests are limited and our capacity to exert influence equally limited. Our claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Australia does seem these days to like to punch below our weight. We shelter behind the feigned modesty of "middle power" when in fact, as the thirteenth largest global economy (comparable with Russia) and a member of the G20, we are far from being in the "middle". We may lack the confidence of our convictions on the international stage, but we do not lack power. We simply fail to appreciate the power that we do have, and the agency that affords us. In view of our long advocacy of and support for humanitarian principles in the conduct of international relations, Australia,

especially in concert with like-minded nations (and we have joined with Canada and New Zealand several times to announce joint positions on the humanitarian disaster in Palestine), not only has a capacity for advancing constructive internationalism in the conduct of its own foreign policy but a responsibility to do so.

Australia has agency. We do need to use it, however.

The first report delivered by The Australia Institute's newly established International and Security Affairs Program was its 2020 study *Australia's Interests in the Middle East: A Presence in Search of a Policy*.[1] It argued that Australia has two principal interests in the Middle East:

- at a minimum, avoidance of the strategic, political and economic consequences of great power, inter-state and intra-state military competition in the region;
- building and working with the international coalitions that create, uphold and promote the principles of international law on which our long-term prosperity and security depend.

Against that background, this report addresses Australia's interests in Gaza. Consistent with the views presented in 2020, it argues that, for both domestic and international reasons, what happens in Gaza also matters to Australia.

Since the 1930s, outsiders have advanced numerous two-state solution proposals to end the conflict so deeply embedded in the identities of Palestinians and Israelis. Most have conveyed, at least in the minds of their advocates, relatively logical, intellectually neat and tidy, morally defensible, politically appealing principles and suggestions. But nothing in the conflict is neat or tidy. There is no moral equivalence between Hamas's attack on innocent Israeli citizens or Israel's disproportionate response on the ground in Gaza.
A fundamental premise of this paper is that there is no longer a realistic prospect of achieving a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has become, once again, an idea both behind and ahead of its time. In the absence of a genuine political commitment to an altogether different relationship between themselves, a commitment now rendered almost inconceivable by the horrific events of 7 October 2023 and the overwhelming brutality of Israel in its aftermath, peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians cannot be found on the basis of geographic and political separation. Even in moments of relative calm, there is too much history, too little geography, and too little distance between Israeli domestic politics, Palestinian resistance, and the demonstrated willingness of both to resort to violence, for that to happen.

Over thirty years ago, the Oslo process—a bold but brittle initiative to forge a pathway to peace in Palestine—briefly surmounted those obstacles by cloaking the internal contradictions of the two-state solution in ambiguity, and by hope—the rarest of commodities in the Middle East—maintaining precariously the political momentum behind the process.

[1] Allan Behm, "Australia's interests in the Middle East: A presence in search of a policy", 15 January 2020 https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/australias-interests-in-the-middle-east-a-presence-in-search-of-a-policy/

But that momentum fell away following the murder in 1994 of Palestinians in Hebron by a Jewish extremist, the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by another extremist, Palestinian terrorism (from 1994 to 2005, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups carried out more than 150 suicide attacks, killing about 1,000 Israelis) and the ongoing, violent entrenchment of Jewish settlements on appropriated and occupied lands. And when the optimistic music that brought about Oslo stopped, the dance toward two states ended.

Two decades later a line was crossed, for both sides, on 7 October 2023 when Hamas slaughtered almost 1200 Israeli citizens precipitating the devastating, pitiless and ongoing Israeli response that has followed.

The leeway granted by the Biden Administration for Israel to pursue its attempt to destroy Hamas militarily, even without a political endgame and Israeli exit strategy for the war, has been an unmitigated policy and humanitarian disaster for the Palestinians. The manner in which the war has been prosecuted has raised significant questions for the future of Israel as well.

However the present conflict in Gaza concludes, the cumulative effects of these horrific events and great power policy failures will not be felt in the reorientation of Israeli society and politics in more sustainable directions, nor in the collapse of Palestinian ambitions for self-determination and statehood. Instead, it will almost certainly see the supercharging of a cycle of continuing, mutually degrading blows and counterblows, compounded by the disproportionality of death and destruction meted out to the Palestinian side.

We must expect that in the absence of an identifiable circuit breaker, the cycle of violence will continue until one or both sides reach a degree of exhaustion that necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of what each regards as essential to its interests and identity, its authority, credibility, political support and legitimacy in the wider international community, and the future of their children.

As that violence continues, the Palestinian future defies prediction, whereas for now, in any circumstances short of full-blown war with Iran, the durability of Israel is hardly in question. But in a world that has changed irreversibly around Israel since its creation, the contradictions and the bitterness at the heart of the conflict have never been starker. Sadly, and however much we may wish to believe otherwise, the views of external players about desirable solutions to these interconnected problems have rarely had more than a marginal effect on the behaviour of local actors.

Commenting on the brutality of Israel's response and its intransigence, the Israeli academic and social scientist Daniel Bar-Tal has written,

> [It] begins with the dehumanization of Palestinians. They are frequently labeled as Nazis or terrorists, with no distinction made between Hamas fighters and civilian Palestinians. To understand this, one must grasp what "Nazis" mean to Jews—it is the ultimate label of a perpetrator. Added to this are vengeance, hatred, and the

> anger aroused by the events of October 7th. In turn, Israelis seek to deter and teach Palestinians a lesson. Moreover, the same moral disengagement and sense of moral entitlement that appeared among Palestinians have also manifested among Israeli soldiers. The majority of Israeli society is affected by denial and repression regarding what is being done to Palestinians. The desire to humiliate Palestinians also plays a role in the war, evidenced by numerous degrading and humiliating incidents, such as forcing Palestinians to undress, raping the captives, writing slogans on walls, forcing them to kiss the Israeli flag, using Palestinians as human shields in the military operations, or destroying homes for the sake of destruction.[2]

Among Israelis, hope for a peaceful future has collapsed. Between 2006 and 2017, 29% of Israelis, on average, thought lasting peace was possible. Since the October 7 attack, less than half as many (13%) hold on to the hope that it could still happen, while a record-high 74% do not expect a permanent peace between the two sides.[3]

With the Israelis hunkered down amidst genuine pain and political uncertainty, chances of a workable settlement will decline further as Israel proves incapable of achieving its declared objectives of eliminating Hamas. With the international community firmly opposed to the fantasies of the Kahanist Right about ethnic cleansing, but unwilling to address how Israel should deal with the no less genocidal ambitions of Hamas, there is no reason to expect that Israel's imperviousness to external advice will change. If anything, it will harden. It is a desperately sad commentary on the government of Israel that it cannot extend to the people of Palestine the compassion that the Jewish people so rightly demanded as the horror of the Holocaust became clear in the mid-1940s.

On the Palestinian side, as will be discussed later, a lethal combination of bitterness toward Israel and the United States over the slaughter, the sclerotic Palestinian Authority leadership that has lost credibility amidst the travails of occupation, and the risks posed to the Palestinian future by the seemingly inexorable rise of Hamas make engagement with outside parties of limited value.

Exhortation is fine, of course. Defence of principles is important for our own interests. Opportunities may be seized (as James Baker did in the aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait to launch the Madrid process, and Bill Clinton did with the Oslo initiative). US officials deserve credit for their historical efforts to put flesh on the bones of various initiatives, usually in the teeth of Congressional and other resistance. Arab countries continue to advocate for their peace initiative of 2002.

But the consistent failure of such efforts is compelling evidence of the fact that outsiders cannot drive an end to the Occupation, least of all in present circumstances. Nor can they build peace in a domestic political vacuum.

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[2] Daniel Bar-Tal, "Daniel Bar-Tal, on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, before and after October 7 2023: In conversation with James Liu and Veronica Hopner, Wiley Online Library, 28 October 2024 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.13055

[3] Gallup, *Life in Israel after Oct. 7 in 5 Charts*, 22 December 2023. https://news.gallup.com/poll/547760/life-israel-oct-charts.aspx

Accordingly, this report recommends that the Australian government:

- continue to press for a sustained ceasefire in Gaza;
- contribute substantially to humanitarian relief (mainly through UNRWA, notwithstanding its proscription by Israel) and increase direct Australian aid;
- affirm support for the observation of international law, including supporting the findings of the International Court of Justice stipulating provisional measures to be taken by Israel to avoid genocide taking place, including the enforcement ICC warrants by ICC members;
- refrain from becoming entangled in the two-state paradigm as a basis for Australian action when no possibility of such a solution seems likely; and specifically,
- avoid being drawn into commitments to supposedly interim peacekeeping arrangements, purportedly in support of building a two-state solution, when in reality there will be no peace to keep and no second state to create while one of the two states refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other.

Above all, in responding to the situation in Gaza, and wider Middle East conflicts, Australia must maintain consistency between the democratic values we uphold at home as intrinsic to our identity, and those we seek to defend abroad.

The Current Situation

As was pointed out above, the 'new reality' in Gaza is based on the displacement and dispossession of at least 1.9 million people, the death of at least 46,000, injury to at least twice that number, enormous destruction of housing, sewerage, water, medical and other infrastructure, starvation and societal trauma. Gaza is now a wasteland beyond imagination. It is possibly beyond reconstruction. It is further compounded by the extension of the war to Hezbollah and Lebanon, and the opportunistic occupation of additional territory in the Golan Heights.

Despite the scale and graphic imagery of the appalling terrorism levelled by Hamas against Israelis on 7 October, what took place on that awful day is increasingly being seen by global audience in the light of the horrors witnessed since the Israeli response began. The primary global focus is now on the imagery of Palestinian civilians suffering from the disproportionate Israeli response and, increasingly, on Israel's refusal to heed any international criticism of its behaviour in rendering Gaza uninhabitable. Reconciliation along the lines of South African experience is almost unimaginable under those circumstances. Nor are those responsible or culpable, in Hamas, Israel or Washington for that matter, likely to be held to account.

These wounds will therefore remain unhealed for generations of Israelis and Palestinians. They will remain in the collective memory of Palestinians, even if Israel maintains stable and mutually rewarding relations with major Arab governments—something which still suits the strategic interests of the latter, but which is by no means guaranteed.

Against that background, the primary Israeli objective for the foreseeable future will be to destroy any possibility that Hamas can rebuild in Gaza. But so far, at least, there appears to be only modest diminution of Hamas's military potential, let alone its capacity to survive as the dominant political actor on the Palestinian side.

Discussions about conditions for a formal ceasefire might eventually result in lower intensity Israeli military pressure. Or the Israelis might continue to press forward, with further devastating effects on the beleaguered Palestinian population.

In either case, however, there may not be a 'day after'. As both Israeli and Palestinian commentators aver, there is no moral equivalence between the slaughter of 1,300 innocent Israelis and at least 46,000 Palestinians, many of them women and children. But Israel's response has been disproportionate. "Collateral damage" is no justification for the wholesale destruction of people and infrastructure. A ceasefire and sustained negotiation are the only way forward.

If there is an enduring ceasefire, and subject to military developments, the most likely medium-term scenario in southern Gaza will see control falling initially to local refugee camp committees, as was the case during the first intifada from late 1987 until the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) assumed effective control, on the ground, around 1991. Hamas, which effectively overtook traditional authorities in recent decades, especially after 2007, will almost certainly come to dominate that process. In determining access to resources, factional loyalties may once again play a part, but the key factors will be who can access weaponry, and who will be prepared to use it to best effect.

To the extent that Israeli proscription permits it, UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) and other UN agencies will have to deliver education, health and other services in that unstable and sometimes threatening environment. Restoration of housing and other public infrastructure under such conditions will take decades, especially as Israel, focused on its potential for the diversion of funds and materiel, will continue to determine how much access will be granted for reconstruction.

Northern Gaza, including Gaza City and the refugee camps in the northern area and buffer zones inside Gaza, will remain mostly depopulated, under Israeli military control. More than half the population of Gaza will almost certainly remain displaced. Around 1.9 million people are now concentrated, cold and starving, and at serious and growing risk of disease and a collapse of social order, in an area of 28 square kilometres around Rafah. Israel has made it clear it wants the border area adjacent to Rafah, nominally a demilitarized shared zone with Egypt, to remain effectively under full Israeli control.

If the living conditions in Gaza remain unbearable, by design or by default, Egypt will confront, eventually, the possibility of an exodus of refugees otherwise facing mass deprivation and starvation—an exodus perhaps facilitated by Israel. Should that happen, although the systemic character of the Egyptian government would survive, the sovereignty, political and security implications for Egypt would be dire.

Looking beyond Gaza, Hamas will remain the primary symbol of Palestinian resistance to the occupation. It will be more adaptive, adept, agile, effective, focused and ruthless in maintaining its position in civil society than any Palestinian alternative.

Hamas' values are regressive. It should have no place in a democratic Palestinian future. But like its obdurate mentors in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, for Hamas its popularity—or lack thereof—is not the key issue: the simple fact is that it will remain stronger than any other Palestinian actor. Notwithstanding occasional speculation about parachuting in an alternative to Mahmoud Abbas to lead the Palestinian Authority, or to lead an interim administration in Gaza, neither the UAE nor other Arab governments, let alone the United States, can hope to replace Hamas in Gaza with an alternative, durable, Palestinian leadership.

History is an important tutor here: wherever great powers have attempted to impose their favoured administrators and governments—Iran, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan—collapse and state failure has invariably followed. It should be remembered that Britain and France, with the tacit support of the other Western Powers, settled the political boundaries of the post-WW1 Middle East, the consequences of which lie at the core of the current problems in Palestine and the Levant more broadly.

The hubris that informs the notion that populations will opt for western-style democracy rather than security and dignity, together with the political and cultural insensitivity that attends the implementation of this type of strategic imperialism, doom this approach to failure.

Regime change was tried, unsuccessfully, in Gaza by the United States in 2007 in the debacle following Hamas's success in Palestinian elections—which were themselves held at the insistence of the Bush Administration. And for various reasons, each of the Palestinian figures mentioned in current discussions about alternatives for Gaza and the PA leadership—Marwan Barghouti, Mohammed Dahlan and Salam Fayyad among them—would be highly problematic starters.

Squeezed in Gaza, but drawing upon its combat experience there, and with ongoing support from Iran, Hamas will probably step up its efforts to build support in the West Bank. It is already being assisted in this endeavour by extremist and violent Israeli settlers using the current conflict to further terrorize Palestinians there.

If the military wing of Hamas survives and remains in the ascendancy within the movement, it may intend, ultimately, to engage Israeli forces in the West Bank, possibly in conjunction with local urban militias now operating outside the control of the Palestinian Authority. The damage done to Gaza and the Palestinian cause, and the suffering inflicted on ordinary Palestinians by its callous approach, will not have a lasting deterrent effect on its behaviour.

Despite the contradictions between the original commitment to armed struggle of Arafat's PLO and Fatah, Arafat was a political pragmatist. He was responsible for the evolution of the PLO, through the shaping effects of circumstances and personalities, into a transactional, sometimes self-serving, but politically driven organization. It sought, primarily, to be

recognized among western and Arab countries as the representative of the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination and statehood.

For the leaders of the military wing of Hamas, however, its identity, its symbolism, its links to Iran, the ideological and religious rationale for its brutality, and its extraordinary discipline are all based on a genuine, personal and organisational commitment to continued armed struggle. Unlike the PLO, to the minds of the Hamas military leadership the contest was always existential, and it will remain so.

Alternatively, if the civilian wing of Hamas regains dominance over the military wing, Hamas may aim, for now, merely to consolidate its current political supremacy over its secular Fatah rival. Discussions continue with Fatah about the creation of a unified Palestinian movement, albeit one in which Hamas would now dictate, in practice, the terms of engagement with Israel. There has been talk by Hamas officials, once again, of de facto acceptance of a long-term truce, subject to conditions (such as having Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state) that no coalition-based Israeli government would be able to accept.

In either case, together with IDF raids and significantly rising Jewish settler attacks, the main effects, in the estimation of Hamas, of demonstrating a willingness and capacity to engage Israel militarily will be to further discredit the Palestinian Authority.

In practice, it will add to the political strength and appeal of the Israeli Right, important elements of which clearly countenance the possibility—indeed the desirability, from their perspective—of a substantial 'voluntary' displacement of Palestinians from Gaza into the Sinai and beyond. Egypt, observers in Gaza, and (judging by previous US warnings) some officials in Washington, believe that is Israel's ultimate intention.

An Arab Context

Within Egypt, where anti-Israel sentiment is stronger than in most other Arab countries, responding to a mass eviction (or supposedly voluntary departure) of Palestinians from Gaza by threatening to suspend elements of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty controlling military deployments close to the border would be a broadly popular move.

In practice, however, Egypt lacks any credible military options to follow up an exodus and a suspension of the peace treaty. Rupturing ties between the Israeli and Egyptian military and intelligence services would weaken Egyptian control over its security in the Sinai, and threatening to do so would be less attractive to the Egyptian leadership than seeking to rally international support for the preservation of Egyptian sovereignty.

For now, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi prefers seeking financial assistance, especially in the light of reduced access to Suez Canal revenues, and adding value to the relationship with Washington by contributing to mediation attempts between Israel and

Hamas. As Nasser and the Arab world found in 1967, the consequences of posturing *vis à vis* Israel are dangerously unpredictable.

The other Arab states, like the United States and the Europeans, will continue to refer to two states as their preferred outcome, but they can and will do nothing practical to advance that objective.

Even those Gulf Arab states that despise Hamas have sound strategic reasons for engaging constructively with Iran, as well as with Washington. They will be aware of the massive disincentives attached to withdrawal from any supposedly interim arrangements for Gaza into which they might be persuaded to enter by the United States. They will also be conscious that, absent a willingness to confront Israel militarily, the Palestinians would see any commitment by external parties, including Arab countries, to external custodianship and peacekeeping as a means of entrenching the Occupation.

Without any realistic prospect of securing a Palestinian state in the foreseeable future, and with their audiences embittered by US failure to use its power (as they perceive it) to halt Israel's campaign, especially in the aftermath of 7 October, the Arab governments would prefer to see the Israelis bleed, as occupiers, even at Palestinian expense, rather than placing themselves in harm's way.

In the absence of a ceasefire in Gaza, and conscious of the unprecedented levels of domestic anger directed against the United States in the region, the major Arab states have declined to commit themselves to supporting militarily a US-led effort to constrain pinprick Houthi attacks on shipping (including US naval assets) in the Red Sea in support of the Palestinians.

The Saudis and Emiratis are aware, from their own bitter experience, that the brutal, obscurantist Houthis—whose tactics on behalf of the Palestinians are, in practice, a greater threat to Egypt than to Israel—will not succumb to external pressure, and least of all when it is seen as being instigated by the United States on behalf of Israel. [4]

They understand that the relationship between the Houthis and Iran matters greatly to the Iranians, with whom Arab leaders are seeking a more balanced and predictable relationship at a time when, in Arab eyes, US commitment to preservation of the regional security order is open to question.

They also appreciate the relationship with the Houthis is complicated, and not entirely under the control of Tehran. And even as the political future of Yemen itself remains in contention between clients of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and other interested parties, the potential for a resumption of Houthi retaliation against the oil and other infrastructure of the Gulf states has to be considered.

[4] Sarah Phillips, Why US Strikes will only embolden the Houthis, not stop their attacks (…) *The Conversation*, 23 January 2024. https://theconversation.com/why-us-strikes-will-only-embolden-the-houthis-not-stop-their-attacks-on-ships-in-the-red-sea-221588

US-led naval deployments notwithstanding, it remains solely in the context of a ceasefire in Gaza that a deal with the Houthis might be struck, probably through Omani mediation, provided that a full-scale conflict between Israel and Hezbollah or Iran can be avoided.

Beyond the issue of Gaza lie larger strategic questions—of which the role of Iranian partners such as the Houthis are part—about relations between Iran, the United States and Israel. Meanwhile, however, no serious analyst of the Houthis and the internal dynamics of their rule considers that naval force deployments and military strikes against them, or their Iranian backers, will bring about a more durable outcome than one based around the United States first securing a ceasefire in Gaza, followed by patient, complex and relentless intra-Arab diplomacy.

Deterrence of the Houthis seems to be a forlorn hope, and not a strategic option that is likely to succeed.

And all of this has, of course, been further exacerbated by the announcement by the group controlling Damascus that it has now established itself as the government of Syria under Ahmad al-Sharaa's leadership, proscribed the former governing Baath party, dissolved the various armed factions (including the HTS) and suspended the constitution. While this delivers a measure of political clarity, Syria's stability remains moot.

Outlook For Resolution

Talk of revitalising the Palestinian Authority is futile because its weakness—like the strength of Hamas—is directly related to the Occupation. And intensification of the occupation in the West Bank is far more likely than steps toward addressing the ideological, security and other issues from which it arises.

On the Israeli side, support for a two-state solution has collapsed.[5] Within Israel there will be no political mandate to remove Jewish settlers, address the refugee issue, resolve the multifaceted issues of Jerusalem, or remove the daily indignities experienced by Palestinians. Neither Israelis nor the Jewish diaspora would countenance civil war to remove the ideologically committed settlers from the total of over 730,000 Jews now in illegal occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

As has been the case in the West Bank, in targeting perceived threats to its security, Israel will seek to undermine the credibility among Palestinians of any supposedly transitional arrangements for Gaza. As the liberal-minded Jewish community in Palestine found in the 1920s, violence has also stymied the potential for developing among Israelis a bi-national approach as an alternative to occupation. The Israeli Left has never recovered, politically or

[5] Gallup, *Life in Israel after Oct. 7 in 5 Charts*, 22 December 2023. https://news.gallup.com/poll/547760/life-israel-oct-charts.aspx

philosophically, from the profound sense of betrayal arising from the second Intifada two decades ago.

For the foreseeable future, Israel will insist upon preservation of the privileges of Jewishness in a Jewish state. That value is central to the whole notion: for most Jews, it is what it means to be an Israeli. Both militarily and psychologically, however, Israel will struggle to rebuild a sense of popular confidence in its ability to defeat or deter its implacable foes in the form of Hamas and, of greater strategic import, Hezbollah.[6]

Israelis face existential choices. They can opt for maintaining and perhaps intensifying ongoing systemic discrimination by their ethno-religious minority over a Palestinian majority—apartheid. But in the absence of a Palestinian state, the continuation of Israeli occupation, and the foundational idea of Jewish exclusivity are no longer deemed consistent with liberal western values, especially among postwar generations in the United States and elsewhere. If that is their choice, therefore, Israelis are likely to enjoy less sympathy, especially among non-Jewish audiences abroad, than ever before.

In effect, Israel's use of excessive force in Gaza will intensify western disapproval and antipathy towards Israel—a significant risk for Israel consequent upon the West's greater political and social secularisation. Israel's use of excessive force has also reinforced the appeal of post-colonial perspectives among Indigenous and other activists in western countries including Australia, as well as in the "global south". Both these trends derive from broader structural and social factors that, while linked, are not directly connected to the conflict, but which present Israel with serious political and strategic dilemmas that it cannot and will not resolve.

Alternatively, Israelis may allow an attempt by the Right at ethnic cleansing, certainly at the expense of the stability of Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan, and probably also damaging Israel's nascent ties with the Gulf Arabs. Indeed, laying the political groundwork within sympathetic circles in the United States for such a process may already be underway under the guise of encouraging acceptance of 'voluntary departures' for humanitarian reasons.

If denied self-determination, Palestinians (other than Hamas) will insist upon equality for all those living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean—in other words, an end to institutionalized Jewish privilege. They will do so with growing skill and resonance in presenting their case to global audiences, and especially to a younger generation of activists. It is, after all, a straightforward claim. Equality is, and should be, a universal aspiration.

Hamas is unlikely to have prepared a political programme to take advantage of whatever leverage it might have gained from 7 October vis à vis the Palestinian Authority or Israel. But

[6] https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/26/a-future-look-back-at-israels-war-on-hamas/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editors%27%20Picks%20-%2012262023&utm_term=editors_picks

it will of course reject entirely the concept of a democratic secular state, just as they will reject entirely the guaranteed protection of the rights of Jews ahead of Muslims.

Even those Palestinians who seek to disassociate themselves from Hamas and the events of 7 October will make little headway towards peacebuilding with Israelis or with others upon whom Israel has long relied for support. The latter are now mobilized to a new level of anxiety and determination by the horrors Israelis have experienced, and by fears of heightened antisemitism—a hypersensitive and sometimes over-exploited trigger-point—in western societies. That resurgence has been inflamed, in turn, by the compelling visual evidence of Palestinian suffering.

Against that background, irrespective of whichever government is ruling a traumatised Israel a year from now, or who might represent the Palestinians, the positions on both sides are most likely to harden. Without mutual trust or respect, seared by the violence, and fearful of open-ended discussions about their futures, neither Israelis nor Palestinians are likely to be prepared to discuss, let alone define to their respective, sceptical political audiences, what they would be willing to accept as alternatives to their existing positions.

In time, a new cohort of visionary leaders on both sides might expedite a process of recognising what they have in common. Outsiders will surely urge them to 'find a pathway to peace'. Some will contribute ideas and suggestions to that end.

But critical fault lines will remain, most notably the disconnections between international expectations of Israel and its behaviour, on the one hand, and the gaps between what progress towards statehood the Palestinians might be capable of achieving in practice and the demands, memories and mythologies central to Palestinian identity on the other. As noted above, these gaps are as old and as enduring as the conflict itself.

It will take generations—even if it is achievable at all—to achieve societal willingness among radicalised Israelis and Palestinians to think about consequences of their existing trajectories. And it will take just as long to find, within their respective societies, the determination to move beyond hatred and bring about the political will, and discipline, to achieve durable change.

Policy

For the foreseeable future, Israel will not commit to allowing Palestinian statehood. It will remain in occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. And so long as the occupation continues, there will be no peace to keep. The fundamental pre-condition to a two-state solution is simply not in place.

The carnage in Gaza and reactions to it have implications and risks for most countries. Australia is affected, whether it be in the form of increased transactional costs for international commerce as a result of the diversion of shipping from the Red Sea; or the

global consequences of Trump's electoral victory in 2024, reflecting in part at least disaffection among young and Arab-American voters reacting to Biden's utterly inadequate response to the situation; or the rise of Islamophobia and antisemitism tearing at the fabric of multicultural societies.

In the wider context, we also need to appreciate that each of the current Middle East situations and issues of most concern—Gaza, the Occupation, Lebanon, the Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, the possibility that Iran will seek to acquire nuclear weapons, the role of Iran and the pressure on the United States forces in Syria and Iraq—are unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future.

As a consequence of the horror of 7 October and its aftermath, Syria faces prolonged political instability; Iran's leadership remains in a state of strategic paralysis; and Russia has few options and even less leverage. However, notwithstanding the degrading of Hezbollah as a strategic asset for Iran and the uncertainty which surrounds Syria following the overthrow of the Assad regime, in most respects, the situation in the Middle East, in February 2025, will be the new normal, possibly for decades.

These are important concerns, but they are not specific to Australia. Facing the likelihood of a continuing, mutually degrading cycle of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, Australia needs to address its consequences—for our interests, including in the multilateral sphere, and for the values we uphold. And this is where constructive internationalism offers the only way forward.

Australia's foreign policy interests in the present and prospective situation centre primarily on finding solutions to the overwhelming humanitarian problems and the reaffirmation of the place of international law in moderating interactions between conflicting parties, state or non-state.

Australia should continue to join calls for a sustained ceasefire in Gaza. The moral and policy case for doing so is overwhelming. Consistent with our values, we should contribute substantially to relief (mainly through UNRWA); and affirm our support for the observation of international law (because that serves our interests in a rules-based international order).

UNRWA

UNRWA features in these recommendations because Israel is unlikely to assume direct responsibility, as the occupying force, for aid distribution and reconstruction when conflict in Gaza subsides. It remains very much in Israel's interest to internationalise the aid and reconstruction programs on which any settlement will rest. Some form of civil administration and international oversight will need to emerge for delivering aid programmes in a systematic and accountable manner, and no organization or government in the five fields where it operates (Gaza, West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) can match UNRWA for the delivery of education, health and relief services in complex political environments. It has vast experience, organisational depth and an impressive record in each of those areas.

The relationship between UNRWA, Israel, Palestinian refugees, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, host governments, and its major donors (especially the United States) is multilayered. Mostly, it is positive. In certain areas, however, and especially among partisan voices advocating for Israel, it is seen as problematic.

In addition to providing primary school education and other services that would otherwise be unavailable to their families, for Palestinian refugees the very existence of UNRWA symbolises their right to redress, by the international community, for their loss and exile from what is now Israel. Right wing Israeli political figures and their followers abroad find that threatening.

For donors, including the United States and Australia, financial support for Palestinians through UNRWA has met obvious humanitarian needs despite the vicissitudes of dealings between Israel and the Palestinians. The political skills demonstrated at the leadership and operational levels of the Agency are remarkable. Its advocacy for humanitarian relief during the current catastrophe has been impressive. UNRWA's record of financial accountability for expenditure of project aid from donors is imperfect, but it is in marked contrast to the bilateral assistance provided by many other donors and non-government organisations.

At the headquarters level, the Agency faces claims from Israel and voices within US politics alleging, however improbably, that UNRWA represents an impediment to achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians. And, despite the genocidal rhetoric of certain Israeli politicians toward Palestinians, and contrary findings by the EU and others who have examined such claims, allegations continue to be made that textbooks used in UNRWA classrooms incite hatred. The daily lived experiences of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, the vitriol directed towards the United Nations and UNRWA, let alone the suffering currently inflicted on Gaza, should more than overshadow such allegations.

Inevitably, and especially where resources are being disbursed, there are pressures on UNRWA staff to accommodate inappropriate demands from host governments and other local parties. These include pressures from the military and security agencies with whom UNRWA field operations must be coordinated. There will be instances where Hamas or others may impose their will upon individual employees of the Agency. It would be unrealistic to expect otherwise, or that among its 30,000 Palestinian employees overall and the 13,000 Palestinians employed by the Agency in Gaza there would be none who were Hamas sympathisers and/or clandestine supporters.

UNRWA sacked 12 employees allegedly involved in the 7 October terror attack, indicating they may face criminal charges. It also announced an independent investigation will be made into allegations Hamas has made use of UNRWA facilities, something the Agency has always denied. While Australia and other donors reinstated their financial contributions to UNRWA following the suspensions imposed in the light of Israeli accusations of UNRWA involvement in the 7 October 2023 attacks, the US is yet to do so. But the fact remains that humanitarian aid to Gaza cannot continue without UNRWA.[7]

[7] Jared Szuba, Al Monitor Security Briefing, 26 January 2024, citing US aid coordinator David Satterfield. https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGwJvgbPMKRFHqVBZXzSDWDrTDx accessed 27 January 2024.

It is a tragedy that Israel, created as it was by the UN in response to the sufferings of the Jewish peoples during the Holocaust, cannot extend the same compassion to the people of Palestine through UNRWA, also a creation of the UN, on whom they are desperately dependent. Even if allegations against individual UNRWA employees are substantiated, the evidence made public to date does not demonstrate the Agency itself has been involved or was responsible for their actions.[8] These situations will remain exceptional rather than systemic, so long as the teachers, health workers and other staff, and the leadership of UNRWA, remain courageous in their insistence that the rights and prerogatives of the United Nations must be respected. That has always, overwhelmingly, been the case.

Two States

The two-state solution is, once again, an idea ahead of its time. But Australian Government Ministers have little choice but to express support for the concept, support that must be highly conditional and nuanced. Sometimes referred to, with some truth as well as dark humour, as the zombie solution, it is hopeful but hollow rhetoric. However, calling for two states will remain, for all sides, the political language of least resistance. As argued earlier, peace-building cannot take place in a domestic political vacuum, however much others may wish the protagonists to recognise it to be in the objective interests of both sides to re-engage to that end.

Rhetoric aside, the key policy concern for Australia should be to avoid policy thinking becoming ensnared in the two-state paradigm when no possibility of such a solution currently exists. In particular, Australia should avoid being drawn into commitments to contribute to supposedly interim peacekeeping arrangements, purportedly in support of building a two-state solution, when for the foreseeable future there will be no peace to keep.

Others, especially the Europeans, and the United States, have more substantial direct interests at stake in containing, managing and perhaps resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than we do.

International Court of Justice

The Australian response to the referral to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of allegations of genocide by Israel—and the obligation of countries, including Australia, that are signatories to the Genocide Convention to uphold and give effect to the findings of the Court—is only one instance, but an important one, in which our values will be tested as a result of the present conflict.

[8] *New York Times*, 'Details Emerge on U.N. Workers Accused of Aiding Hamas Raid' 29 January 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/28/world/middleeast/gaza-unrwa-hamas-israel.html?campaign_id=190&emc=edit_ufn_20240129&instance_id=113796&nl=from-the-times&regi_id=46450018&segment_id=156743&te=1&user_id=80ded67a8cf62f16579f6b8884b7efc2

So far, Australia has limited its comments to noting that the findings of the ICJ are binding upon the parties. But if we were to acquiesce in a refusal by Israel to meet the requirements the ICJ has determined—a retrograde step with deplorable outcomes—Australia's policy advocacy credentials and international image as a positive and constructive contributor to multilateral organizations would be at risk.

Our policy response to the ICJ interim measures will also shape perceptions of our credibility beyond the arena of international law.

Australia has a distinguished record of support for UN agencies and associated institutions in areas such as human rights, women, the environment, arms control, food security, and others in which Australian stances have reflected our interests and values. But whereas our capacity to shape agendas and debates is substantial, it can be weakened to the detriment of our interests by allegations of duplicity, if we are seen to choose not to exercise our responsibilities.

In particular, Australian candidacies in international bodies will need to take account of reactions to developments and our policy positions concerning Gaza, especially in the African, UN and Commonwealth contexts. Our record on Gaza, and the ICJ case led by South Africa will be scrutinised, and in closely-fought contests, we will struggle to succeed without African, Arab and regional support.

Values, Interests and Alliance Relationships

Beyond meeting those tangible concerns, Gaza has consequences for our interests, and poses questions about the values we hold, which we cannot afford to ignore. Australia should attempt to find a balance between, on one hand, our interests in supporting diplomatic initiatives and other constructive activities of our European and North American partners; and, on the other hand, our less tangible, but also significant, interests in projecting, with confidence and consistency, the values important to a changing, ethnically diverse Australia.

At our best, Australia takes pride in our multicultural identity. At our best, we promote respect and tolerance for religious, political and ethnic difference. But our interests, including our domestic cohesion, are not immune from the anger across the world over Gaza, at government and popular levels, and the strength of our commitment to those values is rightly being questioned.

Supporting the Jewish identity of Israel is understandably important to many Australians; but identity and sovereignty are not necessarily the same. Palestinians, Kurds, Druze and Maronites, among others, have maintained their identity without enjoying sovereignty. And it is clear that if Israelis and Palestinians are to enjoy their right to live prosperous and dignified lives in peace, sovereignty between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean will have to be shared.

It is also important for Australia that both Israelis and Palestinians enjoy safety and security consistent with our respect for international law.

At a time when we would wish the emerging generation of Arab activists, and a younger generation of Australians, to respect the liberal values we believe build security between and within nations, western rhetoric about human rights has never had less resonance. The strength of the "rules-based international order" has been undermined by the inconsistency and hypocrisy of the same nations which claim to value it above all else.

Consistently defending the values, including international law, upon which the global order was developed in the last century with Australia's active support, ultimately reflects sound strategic judgment on our part.

But it poses real challenges – political, moral and strategic – for policy makers.

Australia's security dependence on the US and habitual support for US foreign policy initiatives leaves Australia significantly exposed to the unpredictable consequences of a second Trump Presidency. Moreover, determined American attempts to protect Israel from the consequences of its actions, and the stance of the Trump administration towards the United Nations and the pillars of the multilateral system in general, risk further damage to the credibility and respect accorded to institutions whose role we value, both in principle as international citizens, and in practice.

We may despair at its politics and disagree at times with US policies. But bilateral defence and security issues aside, the United States will also remain important for Australia as its dominant (and sometimes singular) point of policy reference in the multilateral system. It is an indispensable contributor to the funding of UN agencies. When the United States chooses to disengage, which it has done from time to time because of presidential and Congressional rancour over criticism of Israel, the value of those institutions to our interests diminishes.

There will be times we will choose to side with Washington on key issues rather than see it walk away from arenas in which our influence is strongest, or in which we have important interests to pursue. The multilateral system is sufficiently robust to absorb such occasional pressures. But Gaza makes those choices to support the United States more costly to our hard-earned reputation for balance and objectivity, and harder still to justify where we have our own concrete interests at stake.

Some awkward choices also lie ahead for Canberra in managing regional relationships, especially if Pacific countries continue to give Israel strong support amidst the carnage in Gaza while regional Muslim countries, notably Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia, remain critical of Israel's performance.

As the conflict continues, therefore, Australia should endeavour to maintain consistency between the democratic values we uphold at home as intrinsic to our identity and those we seek to defend abroad. At the end of the day, efforts to defend our values are central not only to our identity but also to defending our interests.

Gaza is a timely reminder that the resources we apply to our diplomacy need to be strengthened, especially in the multilateral arena, as we seek to build upon the standing we

enjoy in those circles, and work to broaden an international consensus around respect for human rights and the international rule of law, through forceful and calibrated advocacy for constructive internationalism.

The Middle East poses profound issues for our common humanity, but the wider consequences for Australia's interests arising from its unresolved traumas mean it will remain a region we ignore at our peril, and theirs.

Where To?

Perhaps what the Middle East needs most of all—but is most unlikely to have— is a supra-state solution to its inter-state problems. And to that end, it desperately needs leaders of imagination and good-will to lead people away from armed aggression to engaged and sustained diplomacy. Israel would need to build trust in a region where trust has generally been an artefact of effective delegation conferred by a strong central power.

But if Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat could bring about a rapprochement between Israel and Egypt, and Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat could agree to the Oslo Accords, there is at least a partial precedent for an Israeli leader and an Arab or Palestinian leader to employ diplomacy rather than airstrikes. If logic were to prevail, Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia would all find the investment significantly less expensive than war.

While no-one should under-estimate the difficulty of building a peace between such ideologically opposed antagonists as inhabit the Middle East at present, what option is there apart from mutual destruction and the threat of nuclear weapons use? And in this, the global community has just as much interest as the belligerents themselves.

How do the states of the Middle East transcend the implausible two-state solution to create a lasting peace? How do they cut the Gordian knot? Just as Alexander the Great solved the problem, not by untangling the knot but by cutting it, so the international community needs to contemplate how the parties involved might achieve a solution that is at once bold and radical. It needs to identify and advocate for approaches designed to "cut through" rather than remain stuck in the quagmire that exists between Palestinian impotence and Israeli intransigence. So it needs to embark upon building an environment conducive to the sustained diplomacy and the painstaking negotiation that is always entailed in creating and delivering innovative foreign policy solutions.

Europe's Experience

Historically, sustained diplomacy has provided some of the truly powerful instances of statecraft creating a better world. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which concluded the disaster of the Thirty Years War that saw Europe depopulated by over thirty percent, brought the warring parties together in a fundamental realignment of Europe's way of doing business. The Thirty Years War was a pan-European conflict, stretching from Spain to Russia. It involved complex interfaces between religion and politics, where the consequences of the

Protestant Reformation worked their way through the religious, social and political structures of Europe. It was immensely complicated, and disastrously destructive. While the pretensions of the Habsburgs to the domination of Europe were finally contained, a "balance of power" doctrine formed the basis of a fundamental re-shaping of European politics. Germany, which suffered the greatest population losses and economic damage during the Thirty Years War, probably benefited most from the Peace of Westphalia, in that it brought Catholicism and Protestantism into relative harmony, and allowed the various independent political entities that emerged to generate the prosperity that eventually resulted in German unification under Bismarck two centuries later.

In short, the Peace of Westphalia was a brilliant solution to a transfixing problem that ultimately resulted in the Europe that now exists, its many intervening travails notwithstanding.

While Europe as we now know it might have begun with the Peace of Westphalia, it did not end there. It endured many conflicts both local and regional, revolutions, dynastic implosions and regimes that came and went. The twentieth century in particular saw two disasters that again changed the face of Europe. But, again, the powers of Europe (with the assistance of America as a rising global power) found creative solutions.

The 1945 creation of the UN, in which Australia played more than a bit part, created new hope from the rubble of WW2. Sure, eighty years later the UN needs rejuvenation and the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council needs re-consideration, as Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong intimated in recent remarks.[9] But it remains an available resource that lends authority to multilateral negotiation – the most demanding form of diplomacy. The finalisation of the UN Charter and the establishment of the United Nations also set the scene for the post-WW2 continuation of the political transformation of Europe. Death and destruction have their own way of concentrating the mind. The "never again" of 1919 barely lasted twenty years. The mega-deaths and massive destruction of WW2 persuaded the Europeans once again to find permanent ways of reducing the threat of conflict between France and Germany, and of preserving economic stability.

NATO, established in 1949 under American leadership to deter Soviet aggression, provided one avenue. It was quickly followed by the Council of Europe, a vehicle created by Europeans under European management. France, Germany, Britain, Belgium and Italy were the founding members of an association that now counts forty-six members and, until 2022, also included the Russian Federation. Following a French initiative, the European Coal and Steel Community was established in 1951 to integrate the European coal and steel industries. This, in turn, led to the formation of the six-member European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), established in law by the Treaties of Rome in 1957. And in 1958, the European Coal and Steel Community was replaced by the European Parliamentary Assembly, the forerunner of the European Parliament established in 1962, consisting initially of France, the Federal Republic of

[9] See Penny Wong, "National Statement to the United Nations General assembly", 28 September 2024 https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/national-statement-united-nations-general-assembly-0

Germany (remember, Germany was still divided), Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. And the rest, as we say, is history. Britain chose to be an outsider, then a part insider (it refused to join the Maastricht Treaty which formed the European Monetary Union in 1991 and a common European currency in 2002), then an outsider once again following Brexit.

Of course, Europe's experience and history is specifically European. It is instructive nonetheless, and illustrates what can be done in the interests of peace, prosperity and stability. And, at various points, it has been able to live with the membership of three Nuclear Weapon States. The establishment of the European Community in 1957 and the European Union in 1993, with its own parliament to transform agreement into binding legislation, demonstrates what states that are not naturally aligned can do when human security and the security of the citizens becomes the central performance indicator of national security. It represents the transformation of statecraft into supra-statecraft. Although Germany foots a major part of the bill, it evidently finds this contribution infinitely more attractive than its own repeated demolition and consequent reconstruction, its twofold fate in the twentieth century.

Southeast Asia's Experience

In its own way, the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 ended a period of tension and confrontation between the five principal neighbouring states of Southeast Asia. Each had emerged from differing experiences of colonial occupation by Spain, the Netherlands, Britain and the United States, and with the subsequent expansion to ten members, France. They had also experienced Japanese occupation with varying degrees of brutality. With quite different pathways to independence and quite different internal security experiences – not to mention their internal ethnic and racial differences – their emergence as independent states was less than auspicious. Yet an enterprising group of leaders saw the potential benefits of a trans-cultural association.

Dismissed by some high-handed "realist" commentators as little more than a talk-shop, ASEAN has succeeded in maintaining the peace and stability of the region for over half a century, and invested in levels of prosperity that were unimaginable when it was formed. ASEAN's subsequent expansion into a ten-member regional association has encouraged dialogue and a sustained diplomacy aimed at conflict avoidance and resolution and economic co-prosperity. Each member has been able to develop complex and generally balanced relationships with China and America, while at the same time benefitting mutually from China's massive economic growth.

ASEAN's experience is quite different from that of Europe, of course. Yet, like Europe, it offers an instructive model for managing cultural, religious and ethnic impediments to regional harmony. Culturally, the ASEAN members tend to be more accepting of difference than many other states generally tend to be. So their tendency to rely less on formal institutional arrangements supported by formal agreements may be less effective than more structured arrangements. But it does at least demonstrate that countries with

Buddhist, Christian, Confucian and Islamic cultures can collaborate effectively in both the national and transnational interest.

An Association of Middle Eastern Nations?

While most Arab and Iranian leaderships emerged intact and even more repressive from the Arab Uprisings, the social, economic and intellectual character of the region itself is continuing to change. As a younger, well-educated, connected generation tries to define what it means to be both Arab and 'modern', even Saudi Arabia and now Syria are facing questions about the appropriate relationship between state and society in ways that were inconceivable two decades ago.

Moreover, there is arguably a connection between the internal dynamics of states, and their approaches to dealing with one another, that suggests the possibility that a more stable regional environment may yet emerge, as the views and concerns of younger Arabs, Iranians and Israelis find expression in their respective political environments.

Accordingly, we suggest that it may be appropriate to consider ways of building support for the creation of a supra-national forum, across the entire Middle East, along the lines of the processes that led eventually to the formation of the European Union, where diplomacy, negotiation and mutual accommodation were designed to prevent the re-occurrence of mutual destruction.

Admittedly, unlike the historical circumstances that were strongly conducive to the emergence of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and ultimately the European Union, and the formation of ASEAN, there is no direct external challenge to the security of the region. Relations between Iran and the Arab states are wary, if not openly adversarial, but that is a familiar, almost customary situation for all concerned. The countries of the region do not feel threatened by Russia, or China.

What is new is a growing sense within Saudi Arabia, and other Arab nations of the Persian Gulf, at both government and popular levels, that its future now rests in its own hands. Relations with Washington are important and valued in Arab capitals, of course, but it is understood that under a Trump presidency, the US security umbrella will be, at best, transactional and possibly transitional.

At the popular level, antagonism towards the United States over its backing for Israel's destruction of Gaza is keenly felt. And if the war on Gaza resumes, there will be pressure on leaderships to rethink whether the established US relationship is still fit for purpose, politically and strategically.

In Iran, a younger generation, frustrated by the conspicuous failures of the present leadership at home and in the region, may yet find ways to modify, or perhaps even shake themselves free of the intellectual and political shackles of the theocratic regime. Iran's ties to Russia arise from strategic necessity, nothing more. And there is no insurmountable obstacle to Iran arriving at strategic understandings with Saudi Arabia, despite misgivings

and uncertainties on each side, including over the extent to which Iranian influence can shape the behaviour of the Houthis and other malign actors.

The largest challenge to building a new regional security architecture would be to fit Israel into such an inclusive consultative process. But Israel's newly-demonstrated military dominance at present represents a window of opportunity to explore ideas for recasting dealings within the region without facing the specious counter-argument that any accommodations on Israel's part would suggest weakness.

Arab sponsorship of an invitation to Iran to be part of a consultative process with Israel would perhaps encourage Israelis to see an alternative future as more appealing than the enduring hostility of the Arab world. It would also be an interesting test of whether Iran was willing to respect and support an Arab determination to look beyond the United States military presence in the Persian Gulf to find regional solutions to security concerns. Even if the tenor of relations between the United States and Israel remained unchanged, Tehran would be likely to welcome a winding back of the US military presence in the Persian Gulf if that were part of a stabilization of dealings between the major regional players.

The larger challenges would be to find a means through which the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians could be addressed in such a forum; and how to deal with the political resistance within Israel to any steps that might appear to preclude actions, unilaterally or in conjunction with Washington, to prevent Iran achieving nuclear capability.

From a modest beginning of a consultative nature—difficult as it would be to achieve given the political, ideological and other issues involved—but with strong and sustained US support and encouragement for such engagement from a future US Administration—there may emerge, over time, a more conducive environment for a settlement between the parties themselves. Of course that may prove not to be the case. But even if it failed to do so, it would be hard to argue that the world were worse off for trying.