

# COMMENTARY

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## **Will Netanyahu Seize the Moment?**

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**T**here is a growing consensus among Israelis and Arabs that the Israel-Hamas war will end just like the 2009 and 2012 encounters. Hamas will declare victory by pointing out the casualties and pain inflicted on the Israelis and the likely limited relief it will obtain from the crippling blockade. Israel will be satisfied that Hamas' military capability and infrastructure is destroyed or seriously degraded while leaving Hamas' governing structure basically intact, as Netanyahu prefers the lesser of two evils—a weakened Hamas rather than the rise of a Jihadist authority in Gaza.

The status quo that existed before the war will gradually be restored, Hamas will rebuild its shattered forces, tunnels, and a new cache of rockets with greater sophistication, and Israel will prepare for the next round of fighting to keep Hamas at bay.

This scenario is sadder than sad; it projects hopelessness about the prospect of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and disregards the repeated heavy toll these mini-wars exact in destruction, death of innocent civilians, and human suffering, further deepening emotional scars and making peace ever more elusive.

Can this appalling scenario be avoided? What would it take, and by whom? The answer lies at the heart of two principle requirements:

Israel rightfully insists that Hamas must permanently renounce violence and disavow its stated objective to destroy Israel as a precondition to lifting the blockade; Hamas demands the lifting of the blockade to allow for the free flow of goods and travel as a precondition to any enduring ceasefire. Both demands are extraordinarily difficult to accept as neither is prepared to concede without meeting the other's demand.

Both sides have agreed in the past on ceasefires, which met their objectives only in part. Unfortunately, the lull in hostilities during those periods was not utilized by either side to foster more sustainable peaceful relations.

Although Israel and Hamas view each other as mortal enemies, this war has forced them once again to recognize that neither can destroy the other, and they must now begin to moderate their religious or ideological narratives, necessitated by the changing circumstances. In reality, Israel can reoccupy Gaza and topple Hamas, but Netanyahu does not want, and wisely so, to assume the burden of administering the Strip and caring for nearly two million Palestinians without a viable exit strategy and without leaving behind sustainable calm. Equally, Hamas realized that firing over 3,000 rockets at Israel and its efforts to kill or kidnap Israelis has had little effect.

The fundamental difference in this war, however, may well change Israel's and Hamas' calculus:

Never before has Hamas been so strapped for funds and isolated. Egypt destroyed the tunnels leading to Gaza, virtually ending the flow of goods and depriving Hamas from collecting taxes, and closed the Rafah border crossing. Iran's financial aid was reduced to a trickle, and the continuing Israeli blockade and the lack of financial and political support from the Arab states and the PA (with the exception of Qatar and Turkey) added immeasurably to Hamas' woes.

All combined have left Hamas with no prospect of improving the conditions of its despairing populace to stem the growing public restiveness and discontent. With little left to lose, Hamas ignited a new crisis to shake up the status quo, hoping to change the dynamic of the conflict from which it could benefit, regardless of the risks involved.

Conversely, Netanyahu's popularity has soared; public trust in his leadership has never been deeper. He has understood the limits of what Israel can do and shown restraint by rejecting calls from his right-wing political partners to expand the war beyond his stated objective—the destruction of the tunnels and Hamas' infrastructure.

The question for Netanyahu is whether he would be willing to return to Gaza and “mow the lawn” again, and if that would secure Israel's future despite the lack of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before he departs the political scene.

Netanyahu is a zealous ideologue who believes that Israel is not an occupying power and that the entire Holy Land, including the West Bank, is an inseparable part of the Jews' existence and whose redemption is intertwined with the redemption of their land.

With this deep conviction, can Netanyahu change his position and take a historic leap of faith to work toward ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

I disagree with those who suggest that Netanyahu will never change his stripes. Many deeply ideological leaders before him have unexpectedly risen to the occasion to answer the call from their people and the international community for a drastic change.

Former Israeli Prime Ministers Begin and Sharon, de Klerk of South Africa, and Gorbachev of the former Soviet Union are some prominent leaders who unpredictably changed their political convictions and direction; Netanyahu himself had unpredictably accepted the Wye River Memorandum.

Netanyahu is a skilled and astute politician; he knows how to rally the people around him, is not deterred by obstacles, believes in himself, and is totally dedicated to Israel's national security.

The time and circumstances in which he finds himself now place his deep ideological conviction against the unmitigated reality of the Palestinians. As a leader, he now realizes that the condition in which he finds himself provides him a pivotal moment in time that may not be repeated to seek an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As John F. Kennedy once said, "leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

The current 72-hour ceasefire provides an opportunity for Netanyahu to demonstrate leadership, courage, and vision, and shift the onus entirely on Hamas and those countries critical of the blockade.

He should offer a complete lifting of the blockade in phases over a period of time (two to three years), provided that Hamas agrees to renounce violence and demilitarize Gaza. Hamas must also agree to the stationing of a robust international force to monitor the borders and PA security forces to supervise the crossings from Gaza into Israel and Egypt.

In addition, Hamas must adopt the Arab Peace Initiative, which would mean implicitly recognizing Israel and at the same time offering Hamas a face-saving way out.

Whether or not Hamas agrees to this Initiative, Netanyahu will emerge as a statesman who is ready to strike a deal that the whole world would embrace while achieving a remarkable feat without risking much, radically changing the outlook for the resumption of serious peace negotiations.

Ultimately, Israel's long-term national security rests on ending the blockade and neutralizing the threat from the West Bank in particular by negotiating with any representative Palestinian government and ending the occupation under mutually accepted terms.

Netanyahu has served as Prime Minister longer than any of his predecessors, with the exception of Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion. Like any other leader, Netanyahu is surely thinking about

his legacy and likely wants to be remembered as the prime minister who led his people to a lasting peace, rather than leaving Israel even more insecure and vulnerable.

Will Netanyahu seize the moment and give the next generation of Israelis and Palestinians the greatest gift—to live, grow and prosper together in peace?

Maybe I am a dreamer, but as Victor Hugo once observed: “There is nothing like a dream to create the future.”

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir’s web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/will-netanyahu-seize-moment/>

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