



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

The dangers of returning to the status quo ante in the Middle East



After more than two years of horrific violence and hundreds of thousands killed and wounded, Israel has not decisively changed the balance of power on its two most important fronts: Gaza and Lebanon.

The prospects of Hamas and Hezbollah disarming remain remote, also after the latest **UN resolution on Gaza**.

In military terms, Israel might have come out on top, yet both organisations persist and retain the ability to rebuild.

Taking the long view, the last two years might not have done much more than what Israeli analysts often cynically call 'mowing the grass', i.e., temporarily cutting back these movements' capabilities.

The implications for the civilian populations on all sides are dire. Continuing violence, as is already taking place both in Gaza and Lebanon despite the ceasefires, is set to continue and periodically flare up.

The kind of extraordinary escalation of the past two years is also bound to keep occurring on a familiar 10- to 20-year cycle, if not more frequently.

Locked in a cycle of violence

Hamas has claimed that the purpose of its attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 was to change this pattern, at least to disrupt the situation in which the burden of the ongoing conflict was borne mostly by the Palestinians and Israel could thrive economically and diplomatically. Yet, the movement has probably not achieved its goals either.

Israel will more than likely weather its current increased unpopularity and forge ahead regardless of the moral opprobrium now more firmly attached to it.

Particularly if Benjamin Netanyahu were to lose power, the country's international stock could rise again, at least somewhat.

Polls show Hamas retaining majority support among Palestinians, who also mostly oppose the movement disarming

Both Netanyahu and Hamas have successfully shaped the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the last years of the previous millennium.

Their uncompromising views and actions have forestalled the slight opening that the Oslo process might have offered and made sure that the region remains locked in a cycle of violence.

Removing either of them, an election defeat for Netanyahu, Hamas rebranding or merging into a new Palestinian entity, will not, by now, be enough to change the situation.

Not that either seems to be forthcoming. Polls show **Hamas** retaining majority support among Palestinians, who also mostly oppose the movement disarming.

In Israel, **Netanyahu** still holds the best cards in elections scheduled for next year. His coalition might lose its majority, but, for now, it looks as if the opposition might not be able to form a government either.

Support for the most radical elements on both sides

The continuing or growing support for the most radical elements on both sides, despite the suffering and carnage of the last two years, is a function of several depressing tendencies.

First of all, it shows how violence polarises the societies caught up in it. It also shows the lack of trust on both sides in an eventual peaceful solution.

Israelis only see an everlasting threat to their security, and every withdrawal leading to a direct targeting of their civilians

Palestinians see Israel only violently extending its grip on the West Bank and now Gaza, with the possibility of their rights being respected, let alone restored, receding ever further.

Israelis only see an everlasting threat to their security, and every withdrawal, whether from Lebanon or from Gaza, leading to a direct targeting of their civilians.

Of course, there's much more at play, and both statements can be accompanied by endless caveats. Yet, these two sentiments form the core of what needs to be addressed in the first instance, before more progress can be made.

A situation of 'not war' without mechanisms to move beyond that

The **Trump** and now **UN plan for Gaza** and the ceasefire in Lebanon do not do that. They both aim for a situation of 'not war' but do not include sufficient mechanisms to move beyond that.

Over the coming months and even years, all kinds of formulas will be put forward to make it seem that disarmament of Hamas and Hezbollah is imminent or gradually happening, without either being the case.

Despite its military successes against Hezbollah in particular and the levelling of Gaza, Israel has not been able to suppress them

What the last two years should make clear is that despite its military successes against Hezbollah in particular and the levelling of Gaza, Israel has not been able to suppress them.

This means that nobody else can do it either, with the possible exception of a ruthless, Sunni-dominated Syria at some point operating in Lebanon.

However frustrating this might be to the people in Israel, the West and the Arab world who'd rather see Hamas and Hezbollah disappear, the reality is that their presence will to a large degree keep determining the region's dynamic.

An extremely bloody and nasty 'solution'

Right now, reducing these movements only looks feasible on a very long time-frame. As noticed above, only Syria is likely to be able to deal with Lebanon, eventually. And such a 'solution' is likely to be extremely bloody and nasty.

In Gaza, a very long-term Israeli presence along the present, unsustainable, lines could possibly slowly choke off Hamas supplies. But even that is not certain, given the group's proven abilities to circumvent blockades.

The moment that Palestinian suffering has receded somewhat from public view again, life will continue as before both in Israel and the region

In the meantime, Israel's strategic position in the region has improved vis-à-vis Iran and also with regard to Syria. The moment that Palestinian suffering has receded somewhat from public view again, life will continue as before both in Israel and the region.

Expectations – most often voiced on the global Left and especially since the war in Gaza – that Israel will follow the path of South Africa and will be forced into abandoning its national project are misguided. For one, it's completely unclear what such a denouement will look like in this instance.

A very gradual building of trust and respect

There are no readily available solutions at the moment. There might have been, to some degree, more than 25 years ago. Now, the best that can be hoped for is a very gradual building of trust and respect.

If the alternative is to let the situation fester and return to a familiar, deadly pattern, it is clear that it's time to take a different approach.



Disarmament of Hamas and Hezbollah, and a cessation of attacks on Israelis, Palestinians and Lebanese, should remain the ultimate goal

Just achieving relative quiet, as both the Trump plan and the Lebanon ceasefire appear to aim at, is not nearly sufficient for this.

The responsibility rests first and foremost with Israel to show Palestinians that it will stop encroaching on them and is willing to contemplate restorations of rights and land. Nothing will happen without that basic step.

Movement on this issue should be accompanied by reciprocal steps towards disarmament. In the end, the security situation will need to be underpinned by political progress.

Neither Netanyahu nor any of his currently likely successors will entertain this. But any 'peace plan' or otherwise that does not address this issue head-on as a first step rather than somewhere down the line is not worth its name.

Of course, disarmament of Hamas and Hezbollah, and a cessation of attacks on Israelis, Palestinians and Lebanese, should remain the ultimate goal. But ensuring the cooperation of non-state actors is often nigh-impossible without other circumstances changing first.