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7 October has not changed the Middle East

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Hamas' pogrom against Israel on 7 October has not changed the Middle East, nor its fundamental political dynamics. Neither has Israel's devastating military retaliation in Gaza. Neither has the explosion of anger worldwide.

This apparently is a counter-intuitive point for those who assume events of such deafening noise must contain a signal. Observers claim an historic inflection point is at hand. Allegedly, the upheaval leaves ententes and settlements between Israel and its former adversaries in tatters. The outrage of everyone from Palestinians to the governments of the Middle East, we hear, will change the rules, prevent normalisation and wreck America's plans. Yet despite declarations to the contrary, the evidence of the first fifty days suggests an undercurrent of continuity beneath the tumult. A disaster can be lethal without being transformative.

True to their repertoire, the regimes of Arab-majority states walk a tightrope. Thus far, Egypt plays a double game. It allows but limits expressions of protest. President Abdel Fatah El-Sisi refuses to open the border with Gaza, brands Hamas as terrorists and stays tight with Washington. In line with tradition, Cairo ruthlessly pursues its independent interests. Saudi Arabia condemns the warring parties, but signals its determination to resume its rapprochement with Israel once the crisis recedes. Other Gulf monarchies follow suit as parties of the Abraham

Accords, seeking to build ties with Tel Aviv against Tehran. Turkish President Recep Erdogan denounces Israel and praises the ‘mujahideen’. Yet he continues to allow the transport of oil shipments to Israel. In common, these regimes choreograph their responses to preserve the status quo, limit their liability and deflect or contain public rage. Israel’s adversary and Iranian proxy over its northern border, Hezbollah, thus far keeps a free hand and limits cross-border skirmishes with its nemesis. Eyeing Lebanon’s economic plight and fearing all-out conflict, a movement infamous for its apocalyptic rhetoric calculates carefully.

Beyond rulers, there is little sign of bottom-up, paradigm-changing revolt, let alone a revolutionary wave. Close observers speak of populations both incensed yet moderate in their protest, mostly unseduced by Hamas and its ilk, renouncing indiscriminate violence and opting for peaceful mobilisation. There seems little appetite for further attempts at toppling their own rulers.

As for Washington, there is a familiar pattern: embracing Israel but exerting limited leverage. President Joe Biden’s ‘bearhug’ of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu – a leader who boasts of his ability to manipulate America – yields few tangible gains. Even if America embraces Palestinian statehood, that cause is ever more remote. The superpower stays and brings its weight to bear mostly around the margins, to be cajoled and hectored by partners while its garrisons suffer missile attacks from Iranian-backed militias. Does this look like change to you?

All this inertia has several sources. Firstly, there is the hollowness of rulers’ pan-Arabism. Despite their rhetoric, the powers of the neighbourhood don’t care enough about Palestinians to bleed for them. This is an old political reality. Most practitioners of politics in the area regard the Palestinians as expendable. Governments in this volatile neighbourhood will not obey the dictates of blood, kinship or ‘civilisational’ unity, any more than many Europeans are minded to fight a war of cultural solidarity for Ukraine.

Israel’s neighbouring regimes did not gain power and survive upheavals by following a cultural script that dictates who to align with, or fight against. When it suited Egypt, it betrayed its allies and Palestinians to agree the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1978. Pan-Arabism, like the

call to pan-Islamic mobilisation, has continually disappointed. When Syrian president Hafez al-Assad massacred perhaps twenty thousand people in the town of Hama in 1982, potentates and clerics of nearby lands replied with silence. In 1990, Iraq's Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, trying to rally the region as the new Saladin against 'crusader' Americans. The Gulf rulers demurred and joined the US-led coalition. Against stereotypes of Arabs as cultural dupes, there is a rich history of cold *Realpolitik*.

Just as governments have fine-tuned their techniques to hold mass discontent in check and divert it in safe directions, their subjects seem not to want a clash with their states in the first place. Many remember the violent destabilisation that followed the so-called 'Arab Spring' over a decade ago. They are aware that replacing despots with either anarchy or Islamist theocracy is a cure worse than the disease. This pattern holds despite the mounting deaths, maimings and displacement in Gaza. Such a measured response also favours the status quo.

The most consequential recent development in the region remains not the catastrophes in Israel and Palestine, but Iran's power-projection via its own hand and proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, its growing nuclear programme and its cold war with the Saudi bloc. Iran's adversaries are anxious to make detente with Israel to contain Iran, even as they try to ease tensions with it. They refuse to hold everything hostage to the agony of Gaza.

Second, Washington's posture in the Gulf may be strained, but has not altered. The United States values other things too much and is too frightened of alienating so-called friends, to stake everything on resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. Wisely or not, the superpower stands sentry in the region because of things it is not willing to sacrifice for the sake of Palestine, including oil, counter-terrorism, countering Iran, and a habitual faith that it must not leave.

The Biden administration preaches rules-based order and human rights, but the US also values alliances and partnerships with authoritarian regimes that violate these values as ends as well as means. Across presidencies, the world's leading superpower fears eviction from the Middle East more than its client-states fear American abandonment. Indeed, they exploit America's fear of being seen to abandon their friends, and being supplanted by other powers.

The former Director for Egypt and Israeli Military Issues at the US National Security Council put it this way: ‘Egypt is ultimately too important to US interests to antagonise by withholding military aid, coupled with scepticism regarding American ability to pressure Egypt. If Egypt is critical to the United States and coercion is unlikely to change those Egyptian policies with which Washington disagrees, the thinking goes, the only logical policy is to provide Egypt with unquestioning support.’ So ‘any deviation’ from providing annual military assistance ‘entails an unnecessary and unacceptable risk to US interests’.

As long as Washington is reluctant to coerce, the tail-wagging-dog dynamic will endure. A second Trump presidency, judging by the last one in most of its dealings with states from Saudi Arabia to Israel, will be more indulgent. Too scared to leave, too scared to coerce partners, the superpower loiters like a pitiful giant, its aid, diplomatic support and arms earning it complicity with little influence.

Finally, fundamental change is a long way off because there are no two willing parties committed to breaking the Israel-Palestine deadlock. This is the heart of the problem. The difficulty lies not in the lack of a workable formula or the need for a strong outside broker. Rather, the politics of both parties will not carry any compromise resolution of the conflict. This continues the tradition of Madrid, Oslo, Camp David and Annapolis. Hamas has now forced its captive population into collective, permanent jihad. Israeli ultra-nationalists wield enough power domestically to spoil dreams of a compromise settlement, and some Israeli officials’ overt ambition for ethnic cleansing further poisons the well. Arguments that Gaza proves the West must try harder to solve the Israel-Palestine impasse overlook this reality. Efforts to reheat the old, hubristic line that the west must ‘sort out’ the issue echoes one of the oldest traditions of all, a Whiggish naivety better left behind.

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