



An Opportunity for the US in the Middle East: 1973 vs. 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Yom Kippur War of 1973 ended with a US-driven peace process that eventually led to Egyptian-Israeli peace. The war in Gaza, despite important differences, can do the same, kicking off a new American diplomatic effort that could eventually achieve an historic Israeli-Palestinian settlement linked to a broader Arab recognition of Israel.

Many have highlighted the similarities between the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the brutal Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 in terms of the scale of the intelligence failure and the enormity of the costs to Israel. It is possible that the postwar political process will be similar as well. The end of the Hamas-Israel conflict will offer the US a great opportunity to replicate a historic diplomatic achievement.

Following the Yom Kippur War, the US led a diplomatic process between Egypt and Israel that brought about two interim agreements. Those agreements culminated in the historic peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt in 1979, which was the product of effective American mediation at Camp David a year earlier. A key question is whether there are similarities between the factors that made a diplomatic process possible after the 1973 war and the circumstances that might emerge from the current war.

There are, of course, major differences between the wars. But there are sufficient similarities to create a foundation, however imperfect, for a productive political

process when the current war ends. Of course, we don't know how or when this war will end, but it is never too soon to think about the "day after," even with the limitations on our current knowledge.

To evaluate the potential for diplomatic arrangements, we must first examine the capacity and motivation of the three major parties: the Arab-Palestinian party, the Israeli party, and the Americans. We will focus here on the capacity and interests of the US to advance a diplomatic process.

Why did the US, first under the leadership of Henry Kissinger and then President Jimmy Carter, begin to focus on the peace process in the Middle East, mainly between Egypt and Israel, after the 1973 War? There are two main reasons. The first concerns the superpower crisis with the Soviet Union toward the end of the War, which entailed a Soviet threat of intervention and a response to the American nuclear alert. The danger of escalation of the regional conflict into a third world war focused attention on that conflict. The second reason for rising American diplomatic engagement following the 1973 war was the oil embargo imposed by the Arab states in response to American support for Israel. The embargo quadrupled oil prices, which had devastating economic effects in the US and beyond.

These two factors reinforced American interest in Middle Eastern peacemaking in the aftermath of the 1973 War. But what about the American capacity to advance peace following that war?

The Yom Kippur War demonstrated the depth of Israel's security dependence on the US, as exemplified by the American airlift during the war. Israel's need for this arms delivery showed that it required a source from which to resupply weapons and ammunition during high-intensity fighting. The only source that could – and potentially would – do this was America.

The American capacity to promote a settlement also grew in relation to Egypt. Despite the strategic surprise Egypt and Syria achieved at the beginning of the war, which gave them a major military advantage, and despite major arms supplies from their Soviet patron, they were unable to defeat Israel. In fact, by the end of the war the IDF was deployed around 100 kilometers from Cairo. This state of affairs proved that the Soviet patron was unable to deliver the goods. On top of

that, the rise in Israel's security dependence on the US following the war showed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat that only the US could exert pressure on Israel to make major territorial concessions in the Sinai Peninsula. The restoration of Egyptian control over the Sinai was Sadat's key objective in resorting to war.

The combined effect of such postwar conditions sent a clear message to both parties that the US, and only the US, could promote a political settlement restoring the Sinai to Egypt while protecting Israel's security. Israel could be confident that as an "honest broker," the US would ensure that any political settlement seriously considered the security arrangements it requested.

Both American interest in advancing a political settlement and its capacity to do so have increased considerably since the onset of the ongoing Hamas-Israel war. It is noteworthy that interest in advancing a Mideast political process was quite low on the priorities list of the Biden administration when it took office in January 2021. Previous efforts to promote such a process had failed, including that of the Obama administration. Biden served as Obama's vice president, so he had direct experience with that failure. Moreover, the Biden administration came into office not only with a full-blown socioeconomic agenda but with a highly loaded foreign policy agenda as well, most of which concerned areas outside the Middle East. The key foreign policy issue was (and remains) the growing competition with China, so the administration's focus was on the Indo-Pacific region.

Also, the US has become energy-independent in recent years. This has led to a decline in the importance to the US of the oil-rich Middle Eastern states - though the region has not lost all relevance, as key US allies remain dependent on Middle Eastern oil.

A third reason for the decline in American interest in the Middle East was the disillusionment of the American public over the US failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. In those military interventions the US paid a very heavy price in both blood and treasure - but at the end of the day, its efforts at regime change and democracy promotion failed. The great winners from the American interventions were terrorist entities, especially the brutal Islamic State and most notably Iran, which became a dominant actor in Iraq through its Shiite militias there. In addition

to Iraq, Iran exerts major influence in the region through its coalition of Shiite militias in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.

The 2022 outbreak of the Ukraine War had complex effects on American engagement in the Middle East. On the one hand, it created a new area of interest outside the Middle East and thus potentially further marginalized that region. On the other hand, the war reinforced the importance of Middle Eastern energy resources because of the termination of Russian energy supplies to Europe. The latter development increased the centrality of Saudi Arabia in global politics as a leading actor in what has come to be called the “Global South.” This is the large group of states that are aligned, at least formally, with neither the West nor the anti-American revisionist camp. Following these developments, President Biden changed his attitude toward Saudi Arabia – specifically toward its *de facto* leader, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. After the 2018 brutal murder of Saudi-American journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Biden called Saudi Arabia under bin Salman a “pariah” state. In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Ukraine War and the energy crisis, Biden went to Saudi Arabia and fist-bumped with bin Salman even though the CIA had alleged that the Saudi leader was responsible for Khashoggi’s murder.

The next stage in Saudi Arabia’s rising centrality was when the US became concerned that it is “losing” the Saudis following the Chinese mediation that restored diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran in early 2023. The challenge to American hegemony in the Middle East grew further with the rising alignment between Iran and Russia over the war in Ukraine. Iran became a major arms supplier to Russia, and as China and Russia also strengthened their relations after the war broke out, it appeared that the anti-American axis was deepening its involvement in the region. Moreover, it seemed that this axis was tightening its relations with Saudi Arabia, which was considered not so long ago to be a key American ally.

The Biden administration’s response took the form of talks on normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In exchange for American security guarantees, the Saudis had to commit to establishing relations with Israel, while the latter was supposed to make concessions to the Palestinians. Normalization

with a key Arab and Muslim state was intended to deepen Israel's integration into the region.

This development was received as very bad news by Hamas and probably affected its decision to proceed with the violent invasion of southern Israel on October 7. While the anti-American axis might not have directly initiated the brutal Hamas attack, there is no doubt that it served the interests of this axis by undermining the American peace plans in the region and the renewed relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia.

Every weakening of American influence is an accomplishment for the revisionist bloc. Russia gains from declining American attention on Ukraine, which translates into less military aid. China benefits from a reduced American focus on Sino-US competition in the Indo-Pacific and on support for its allies in that region. China also believes that support for the Palestinians will reinforce its position in the Global South. And Iran, of course, enjoys Israel's suffering at the hands of its Hamas client and benefits from the demonstration of its arch enemy's vulnerability.

All that said, the war between Israel and Hamas has produced an exceptional opportunity for the US to initiate a comprehensive political process in the region. Despite the differences, the 1973 analogy offers a glimpse of hope. As in the post-1973 situation, the US has a rising interest in a diplomatic engagement in the region and also a growing capability, if limited, to promote a diplomatic process.

As was the case in 1973, this interest originates primarily from great power competition, which has been rising throughout this year in the Middle East as well as elsewhere in the world. In a parallel with the Soviet-American struggle over Egypt in the early 1970s, the most keen competition today is for the "great prize" – oil-rich Saudi Arabia. In the 1970s, Egypt was the leading Arab state and thus the main target of superpower competition in the Middle East. Many upheavals have taken place in the Arab world since then, and today we see the rise of Saudi Arabia. Bin Salman has great ambitions to use his country's vast wealth and resources to modernize and empower his nation. Saudi Arabia has thus become the leading state in the Arab world and one of the most important countries in the Muslim world, particularly as it hosts Islam's holy places on its territory.

If Washington's postwar diplomatic process is designed to lead to a two-state solution, Saudi Arabia would have a much easier time leading a pro-American camp of pragmatic states in the region. These states, which are interested first and foremost in economic modernization, include the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan. Facing this group is the violent Iran-led coalition, which has proxies spread across the region.

Each US administration has shown interest in advancing Arab-Israeli peace, but the current confrontation makes clear what the cost of an endless Israeli-Palestinian stalemate might be. The stalemate can be readily exploited by extremists, which can lead to a dangerous escalation in the region and beyond because of the involvement of external powers. The US must do its utmost to reduce the burden of its attention and resources being spread across three arenas that involve (or could involve) violent conflict: Ukraine, Taiwan and the Middle East.

Will the American capacity to promote a settlement rise in the aftermath of the Hamas-Israel war? There is a parallel with the rising Israeli dependence that followed the 1973 airlift. In the current conflict, the US provided Israel with major military and financial aid, including the deployment of two groups of aircraft carriers. Jerusalem's security dependence on the US gives Washington significant leverage over Israel. The Arab and Palestinian parties, for their part, know full well – as did President Sadat 50 years ago – that only the US holds such leverage.

After destroying Hamas, Israel will need security and political arrangements that drastically reduce its security vulnerability. Only the US can lead a pragmatic Arab coalition that will take upon itself the responsibility for civilian administration in Gaza and strengthen the capacity of a revitalized Palestinian Authority to govern the West Bank, and possibly Gaza as well in time. The US might also be able to lead or at least build a combined Western-Arab international force to take care of security issues inside Gaza, while the IDF would be in charge of defending – forcefully and with a powerful deployment – Israel's borders with Gaza. At any rate, in order to mobilize international and regional engagement in the new civilian, financial and security arrangements in Gaza, there need to be political horizons of some kind of diplomatic process for addressing the Palestinian issue even if this process takes quite a bit of time.

American interest in, and capacity to advance, such a diplomatic process after the war is the key element that will make Israeli-Palestinian-Arab peace possible. This process will have to address the major shortcoming of the Abraham Accords: the marginalization of the Palestinian issue. The two-state vision seems completely unrealistic today, but rising American interest in advancing a diplomatic process can make the fulfillment of this vision more likely in the long run.

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