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TWO TESTS FOR AMERICAN DIPLOMACY



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One year into its stride, the second Trump Administration has established a record of diplomatic innovation and upset. Right now it faces two tests that have haunted every American Presidency since Jimmy Carter's: Iran and Palestine. Only patience and skill, directed by an understanding of the past and a vision of the future, will begin to resolve those issues. The alternatives are bleak, as much for the people of the region as for US power itself.

Amid the policy mayhem created by threats to Canada and Europe, and by its damaging ambiguity towards Ukraine, American diplomacy is facing two tests of a more traditional kind: how to handle Iran, and what to do about the Palestinians. The common factor is the stiflingly close relationship between the United States and Israel. The common questions are “would we have better options than following Israeli wishes?” And “can we afford (politically) not to?”

At the time of writing, President Trump has spoken positively of the latest round of negotiations with Iran, giving them more time, while keeping up threats of military action. Prime Minister Netanyahu, after his seventh meeting with Trump in a year, has taken a tougher line. Those who are sceptical point to a similar choreography last June, when Trump spoke positively of the ongoing talks with Iran even as he knew Israeli attacks were imminent, soon to be supported by US stealth bombers.

What could be different this time? For one thing, the Arab States of the Gulf have been trying to prevent a repeat by lobbying hard in Washington. They are absolutely clear that violent methods of the sort threatened by the US and Israel are a danger to their own security. Their diplomatic weight cannot be ignored, backed as it is by their growing role in global investment, and by the reality of China as an alternative in both technology and trade.

There are other new factors. The Iranian regime has once more shown its ruthlessness with its violent suppression of popular protests, and its ensuing purge of civil society. But it has survived, and is the stronger for it – for now. Regime change by means of US and Israeli missiles was never a realistic option. Iran has returned willingly to negotiations on the nuclear issue, but refuses outright to submit its conventional ballistic missile arsenal to limits, as demanded by Israel. The grounds for this firmness are not hard to discern: without the ballistic missile deterrent, Iran would be helpless in the face of an implacably hostile Israel. It has no choice but to defy the pressure.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

There may be another strand to Iran's defiance. It is credibly reported that China has been discreetly supplying Iran with air defence radars and missiles. Not to enable aggression, but to avoid defeat. This makes sense. China is a status quo power when it comes to the Middle East. Like all the countries of the region, it views with deep concern Israel's unrelenting resort to force in pursuit of destabilisation. From their perspective Israel, not Iran, is the perceived threat to regional peace, as "the wolf nearest to the sledge".

The unresolved agony of the Palestinians is of a different order of difficulty. Every US President from Eisenhower to Obama recognised the moral as well as the political imperative of a just and enduring solution. Any real progress though was blocked by the powerful constituency in American politics that supports Israel to the hilt. Under the limp Biden, and confronted with the Hamas terrorist attack of 7 October 2023, the veil of empty words was torn off. Israel was given free rein to attack Gaza mercilessly, in a way which can only be construed as intending to destroy or drive out its population.

At the start of his second term, President Trump proclaimed himself the peacemaker. Confusion ensued, as he failed to get a grip on the situation, allowing the carnage to continue right through to October. A ceasefire brought some relief to the Gazan population. But not much. Israeli attacks continue daily, along with refusal to admit more than the barest minimum of humanitarian relief. Israel occupies more than half of Gazan territory, and controls all points of entry including the Rafah crossing from Egypt. Nothing in Israel's behaviour shows readiness to apply the ceasefire in good faith, nor engage in the peace negotiations that are supposed to ensue. Nothing in the Administration's behaviour shows readiness to apply pressure on Israel to change course. And much suggests complicity in a plan for Israel to colonise Gaza, leaving the ultimate fate of its two million inhabitants undisclosed.

In this unpromising setting, February 19th sees the convening in Washington of the first meeting of the Board of Peace, the grandiose vehicle conceived by Trump for his role as peacemaker. Originally proposed as part of the sequence following the October ceasefire in Gaza, it now appears to have been decreed as an instrument to resolve all conflicts anywhere.

Regional countries have signed up to the Board of Peace determined to use it as best they can to avert a complete annihilation of Palestinian rights and aspirations to statehood: not only in Gaza but in the West Bank, which Israel is progressively annexing *de facto*. China, Russia and the major Western powers have declined to join.

The Washington meeting combines high political stakes with the most unsatisfactory mechanism conceivable for resolving the crisis. The Board of Peace has little prospect of achieving the goal implied by its name, not least because the Administration has no plans to recognise the political agency of the Palestinians. Obfuscation and false narratives will continue.

Caught in a trap entirely of its own making, American diplomacy faces an acute challenge. The root of it, as perceived by the world, is the cynicism of US policy, apparently ready to continue doubling down on support for Israeli settler colonialism at the expense of the Palestinian population. This perception enrages much of global opinion, most significantly in the Arab and Muslim world, and also troubles a growing portion of US domestic opinion. The choice between true peace-making and yielding further to Israeli pressure is stark.

In this way the Iran test and the Palestine test are connected. Together they pose questions about US connivance in what the region sees as a growing existential threat from Israeli militarism. And with it the US's abandonment, proclaimed by the Administration itself, of respect for moral standards, let alone international law. There may be a path back from the edge of this precipice.

It will call for more respect to be given to historical knowledge, and more centrality given to a vision of peace founded on justice, than the present Administration's diplomacy has so far manifested. The implications are far-reaching. Among what is being tested is the future of American power itself.

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