

Lawrence Seymour Cumming

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The Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, P.C. M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada,
House of Commons,
111 Wellington St.,
Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister.

I write this at the three-week mark of the horrific Israel-Hamas conflict which has already taken an appalling toll of human lives and will continue to intensify and escalate in the perilous and terrifying weeks and months to come.

As a Canadian who has spent time in Gaza on two working visits, I do not think of this as a strange or far off place but one that brings vivid personal memories, one for which I have a deep empathy and an abiding affection. Were I to be asked if I have a vision of what hell might be, I would have to say it is being trapped in Gaza under Israeli bombardment.

I propose to address mainly the immediate dimensions of the current crisis but will also touch briefly on the longer-term issues. Both need to be pursued concurrently, and in ways that complement and not contradict each other.

In the strongest possible terms, I would urge your government to press vigorously for a humanitarian cease-fire. Such a cessation of armed hostilities will, of course, not address the basic causes of the conflict, which have been long in the making. Much less will it, on its own, result in a permanent and sustainable peace. What a ceasefire can and sometimes does is to enable potentially effective actors to enter the scene and other things to happen. In this case, the cessation of hostilities would facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to suffering people. Another purpose would be to enhance the prospects of negotiating the release of Hamas held hostages. If, during the ceasefire, other possibly fruitful areas for diplomacy were to emerge, a war-weary world would eagerly welcome them. Whilst it is too early to speak of confidence-building measures and other instruments in the diplomatic tool kit, a pause can be a time to identify and put some of them in place.

Canada needs to press for this kind of humanitarian cease fire regardless of how Israel's Government is likely to respond. I am well aware that it has already rejected such ceasefire proposals from the intentional community. That, however, is no reason not to make the point. We cannot allow the government of Israel – or any other party, for that matter – to determine our national policy. Such would amount to self-censorship and dereliction of responsibility.

I have to say, with much regret, that I have been under impressed by Canada's official response to date. Pronouncements have been unimaginative and robotic in character. We have been informed that “Israel has a right to defend itself”, and “Canada favours a two-state solution”. That sovereign nations have a right to defend themselves from attack is hardly the issue. This is a boxed-in statement, one without air to breathe. What does “defending itself” actually mean? What we are now witnessing has already gone well beyond self-defence and looks very much like vengeance. The world is entitled to ask “is the response proportional?” Proportionality, we need to remind ourselves, is one of the seven basic principles under “just war” theory. At what point does self-defence exceed that threshold and become collective punishment?-- a crime under international law. If official Canada is to play a constructive role at this time of grave crisis, it needs to be, at once, both more nuanced and more categorical in its pronouncements and its actions.

Of course, I cannot fail to observe that, in this instance, the Israeli authorities failed in a most spectacular fashion to defend their citizens. The government had distracted itself with its “judicial reform” plans, all the while transferring military and police resources from the Gaza border to encourage and defend West Bank settlers in violent and illegal land seizures. There is considerable evidence that the government ignored several recent written warnings of probable attacks. All this ineptitude and dysfunctionality has been well reported, and I need not rehearse the details.

My reading of the history of the region leads me to the conclusion that Israeli governments and Hamas have, objectively speaking, been allies for the past three and a half decades. Israel's connivance in the establishment of Hamas ca. 1987 as a counterweight to the Palestine Liberation Organization has been documented. Neither, of course, would admit to being anything other than the bitterest and most implacable of sworn enemies. However, the deadly embrace of this unholy alliance needs to be understood.

The “two state solution” discussion is a much larger topic for another letter. Suffice it to say, I believe that this is no longer a viable option, if indeed it ever were. The repeating of this well rehearsed line in rote fashion has become an exercise in self-deception. There are other options on offer, and the Canadian Government needs to begin exploring them seriously.

I believe also that Canada needs to begin relying more on and actively engaging with the leadership of the United Nations. Though the dysfunctionality of the Security Council, resulting from the veto power held by the five Permanent Members, is well known, the global community needs to invest greater confidence in both the office and the person of the Secretary General. Mr. Guterres has been offering wise and principled leadership in this crisis, and he needs our support. In bolstering the institution and the leadership of the United Nations, Canada would be on solid historical ground. As this country begins to reconstruct a foreign policy, we would do well to draw upon the diplomacy and peacemaking traditions – in short, the “better angels” of Canada's nature. Till we arrive at the stage of a coherent foreign policy, such decisions are essentially driven by your office. We need you, Prime Minister, to demonstrate vision, clarity and resolute conviction in moving us to where we need to be.

It goes without saying that I have no brief for Hamas. Nevertheless, let me say it. Hamas is a

bloody and thuggish organization. Nothing in the murderous assault on Israel that it carried out three weeks ago can be morally justified. However, for the moment, it is the governing authority and provider of public services in Gaza, Assuming that Hamas were removed, there appears to be no understanding, much less agreement on who or what would follow it or who would make that determination. We need, in other words, to be careful what we wish for.

Israel-Palestine cannot long sustain this level of hostility and suffering. The wider region is in grave danger of the conflict spreading well beyond what we are now observing. This war weary world cannot sustain the number and intensity of wars presently underway and threatened. We live in exceedingly dangerous times. Relatively well intention middle powers like Canada have a special role to play and cannot avoid active engagement.

Yours sincerely,

Lawrence S. Cumming

c.c. The Hon. Melanie Joly, P.C., M.P., Minister of Global Affairs.
Foreign Affairs Critics, Opposition Parties represented i the House of Commons
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