18 January 2024 / How the war in Gaza ends

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It’s a New Year, but we got the Same Wars.

SCORING <Density>

SEAN: Hamas and Israel have been at it for over 100 days as of this week.

*<CLIP> ISRAELI, TRANSLATION: 100 days of hope and despair and hope again. 100 days that I enter Omar’s room and I tell him to be strong. And I pray.*

SEAN: We got another deal to deliver humanitarian aid to Gazans.

*<CLIP> CBS: Qatar says it has brokered an agreement that would get medicine and aid to Israeli hostages in Gaza, in exchange for medicine and humanitarian aid for Palestinian civilians.*

SEAN: And the war continues to expand.

*<CLIP> DW: Now, this was the fourth day of US strikes in less than a week on Iran-backed Houthi militants, who’ve been attacking merchant ships in the Red Sea.*

SEAN: But before this spins further out of control, we wanted to ask how it could end?

What would a permanent ceasefire look like? How would we get there?

We found a guy who says he knows how this story ends.

We’re gonna ask him to share on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram, joined by Professor Emeritus Ian Lustick of the political science department at the University of Pennsylvania. He’s been writing and thinking about the Israel-Palestine conflict for …

IAN LUSTICK (UPenn professor emeritus): For 55 years or so, ever since I lived in Israel for six months in 1969. As a student then, wrote my first article on “What do West Bank Arabs really want?” back in… just two years after the Six-Day War. And, uh, I've been studying it professionally, working in the government, working in consulting, teaching ever since.

SEAN: Most recently, he wrote a piece for TIME called “History Tells Us How the Israel-Hamas War Will End.”

IAN: I have really been through so many of these wars. I remember the Six Day War. I even remember the ‘56 war. The 73 war, the War of Attrition, ‘69, ‘70, the Lebanon War in 1982, the Second Lebanon War in 2006. And one of the things that all of them have in common: they don't end because Israel's announced war aims have been achieved, they end because a superpower orders Israel to stop. So that means I was pretty certain, and still am certain, that this war will end not when Israel's expanding list of war aims is accomplished, but when the United States, the reigning superpower, decides to turn on the red light.   
  
SEAN: The professor postulates that none of this will stop until the United States says it should, which might seem kinda like a head scratcher, since the United States, by all accounts, is supporting Israel. We asked him for the history here:

SCORING <Neutrality (a)>

IAN: 1948. There was a civil war first between Israel and Palestinians for many months that resulted in the displacement of many Palestinians. And then Israel was created.

*<CLIP> UN CHAIR* *HERBERT EVATT: And I therefore formally declare Israel admitted to membership in the United Nations. <cheers>*

IAN: The British finally left and the Arab states invaded Palestine. That war continued until 1949. But there was a point Israel was in Sinai. It also was poised to attack and capture the West Bank. In both cases, the decision was not to do it because [of] the British threat to end the Jewish state altogether if Israel dared to attack the West Bank or did not withdraw from Sinai.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> BRITISH PATHÉ: After weeks of stalemate, the Suez Crisis burst dramatically into the news again, for Israel has invaded Egypt. <duck>*

IAN: 1956 Israel, Britain and France attacked Egypt after Egypt signed an arms agreement with the Soviet Union and nationalized the Suez Canal. There was a quick war in which the British and the French were stopped, were forced to withdraw because the United States and the Soviet Union ordered them to. Israel was ordered out of the Sinai and out of the Gaza Strip in March 1957 by President Eisenhower –

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DWIGHT D EISENHOWER: As it is the manifest right of any of these nations to take such decisions and actions, it is likewise our right, if our judgment so dictates, for we do not accept the use of force in the settlement of international disputes.*

IAN: – who told Ben-Gurion – Ben-Gurion, initially his war aim was to never leave Sinai because that's where the Jewish people were created. Eisenhower told him, well, if you want to stay in the Sinai, you're not going to get any American ships visiting a lot through the Gulf of Aqaba. Those were enough to get Israel out of Gaza and out of the Sinai.

SCORING BACK IN <Neutrality>

IAN: In 1967, Israel was faced with threats from Arab countries to attack, which seemed credible. Israel preemptively attacked and destroyed the Egyptian air forces. It took over the Sinai, took over the West Bank, and took over the Golan Heights within in five days. On the sixth day, the military was still fighting against Syria, wanted to expand the war. And the United States and the UN told Israel, no, you have until 2:00 today to stop.

SCORING OUT

IAN: And the order was given by Defense Minister, uh, Dayan, that even if the military commanders continued to fight, they would not even get air cover.

*<CLIP> C-SPAN: On the 10th of June, Syria – the last Arab holdout – agreed to a ceasefire. The fighting was now stopped.*

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT LYNDON B JOHNSON: After three weeks of wrestling with the Middle East, it’s a real pleasure to come home tonight to the peace and quiet of Texas politics.*

*<CLIP> BRITISH PATHÉ: Israel. More than two years ago, there was a battle here. Grim reminders of that six-day fight still lay rusting near the borders. <duck under>*

IAN: In 1969/-70, Israel was fighting on the Canal and the Jordan River – the Suez Canal – a War of Attrition, artillery exchanges and bombing that were taking a toll on Arab communities, Arab armies, but also an Israeli army. And this fighting continued through 69 and 70 and the summer of 1970, because the Soviets put 50,000 advisers in Egypt and a crisis was brewing between the United States and the Soviet Union over this, the United States put tremendous pressure on Israel in the summer of 1970, and Israel finally agreed to 242 – to the resolution that the other countries had agreed to after the Six-Day War – that said that Israel would withdraw from territories captured in ‘67 as part of a peace agreement. Israel had refused to accept that because part of its coalition wouldn't go along with it. Under American pressure, Menachem Begin’s party, the right wing party, left the coalition and Israel made peace, and the War of Attrition stopped.

SCORING BACK IN <Neutrality (a)>

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS, 1973: It is an all-out war. That’s how Israeli Defense Minister Moishe Dayan describes an invasion of the Golan Heights and the Suez by Syria and Egypt.*

IAN: In ‘73, that war continued. After a few weeks, the Israeli army under Ariel Sharon crossed the Suez Canal into Egypt proper, into Africa, and was surrounding and was about to destroy the Third Army. The UN passed a ceasefire resolution, the U.N. Security Council, and that ordered Israel to stop on October 22nd. It did not stop. The United States was engaged again in it. In a super duper crisis with the Soviet Union.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON, 1973: We obtained information which led us to believe that the Soviet Union was planning to send a very substantial force into the Middle East, a military force.*

IAN: Our nuclear missiles were put on alert, yellow alert, and the United States ordered Israel immediately to stop fighting and return to the lines it had held on October 22nd, and to allow resupply of the Egyptian Third Army. That's immediately what Israel did, and the war stopped.

*<CLIP> NIXON, 1973: I think I could safely say that the chances for not just a ceasefire – which we presently have, and which we have had in the mid-east for some time – but the outlook for a permanent peace is the best that it has been in 20 years.*

SCORING OUT

IAN: And we could go on with the 1982 Lebanon War. The 2006 Lebanon War, both of which involved ceasefire decisions by the UN or the United States and France imposed on Israel that brought about an end to the fighting. Every one.

SEAN: I think to some people listening, this might sound sort of paradoxical because the United States is such a supporter of Israel. Because the United States is, in a way, funding these wars, even if the United States might want them to stop, that it takes the United States to stop the wars in Israel that they are funding. To stop this country, that the United States is supporting. How does that work?

IAN: It works in this way. And I'm going to tell a story that might be odd. It has to do with Cuba.

SEAN: Cuba!

IAN: There are two issues in international politics where the United States position is what you call in statistics, three standard deviations from the norm. That means: completely weird. One of them is Israel. When you vote on settlements or you vote and on whether there should be a ceasefire in Gaza, the entire General Assembly, 150 countries will vote one way. The United States, Samoa and Israel will vote another way.   
  
SEAN: Hm!   
  
IAN: The other issue that's like that is Cuba. the UN votes to end the embargo against Cuba. All 180 countries in the UN vote against it, except for the United States and Israel who vote for the boycott. And that's odd on its face because Israel supposedly opposes boycotts. But in this case, it's the United States and Israel together that did vote to boycott Cuba. So what do these two questions – Israel and Cuba – have in common? They both are the questions where there are foreign policy lobbies in the United States that are single-issue movements and have decisive political importance domestically for the president, the Cuba lobby in Florida and the AIPAC, the Israel lobby all over the country. Those are by far the most powerful foreign policy lobbies.

SCORING <Autobahn Kirche>

IAN: When push comes to shove for a president, it's domestic politics that counts, always. So American foreign policy interests only carry American policy so far. It’s when the United States fears a regional war or a confrontation with another great power that the president can say, ‘All right, domestic political costs I'll pay will be tolerable because it will be seen to be a vital national security interest now.’ So what every president is looking for is not it is saying, when will the cost to me of putting the pressure I need to put on Israel to stop it be lower than the costs of allowing Israel to continue fighting? In past wars, those wars have been so quick, that's been an easier question. In this context, it's been a tougher one for the Biden administration. And it's a it's a sharper learning curve. I don't think as many people in the Biden administration understand the history as well as they should be understanding.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Okay. So this war won’t stop until the United States says stop.   
  
 SCORING OUT

SEAN: But when is that gonna happen?  
  
 SCORING BACK IN <Autobahn Kirche>

SEAN: More with the professor when we return on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT <Autobahn Kirche>

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Professor Ian Lustick, who said earlier in the show that Israel’s wars end when a superpower says they should – NOT when Israel achieves their aims:

*<CLIP> ISRAEL PM NETANYAHU: We’re absolutely committed to achieving our war games– our war goals.*

SCORING <Bees Ambient 2B>

*<CLIP> NETANYAHU: Destroying Hamas…*

IAN: To prevent any one from ruling or having influence in Gaza, who will educate children to hate Israel…

*<CLIP> NETANYAHU: …Releasing our hostages –*

IAN: … To establish a buffer zone controlled by Israel inside this small Gaza Strip all along the border, to distance the Palestinian population from Israeli settlements inside of Israel proper…

*<CLIP> NETANYAHU: … Making sure Gaza doesn’t become a threat again…*

IAN: … To prevent the Palestinian Authority of having any role in the reconstruction or rule of Gaza….

*<CLIP> NETANYAHU: …Making sure that we can return our citizens in the North and in the South…*

IAN: …and of course, a war aim not to have to rebuild Gaza. Have other people do it, even though it was Israel that did the destruction. So those are just part of the list that you can find.

*<CLIP> NETANYAHU: … And for that we’ll apply maximum power with maximum precision everywhere that’s needed.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: So how has President Biden responded to Netanyahu's war aims here, and how has his response changed over the course of these hundred days of war?

IAN: Well, I think the most dramatic thing that we saw was right after the Hamas Islamic Jihad attack, United States turned on the green light, which is what the United States typically does when Israel is at a war ‘oh, go ahead, defend yourself or do whatever you call defending yourself.’

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: My administration was in close touch with your leadership from the first moments of this attack. We’re going to make sure we have, you have what you need to protect your people, to defend your nation. And later this week I’m going to ask the United States Congress for unprecedented support package for Israel’s defense.*

IAN: However, within a few days, the Biden administration realized that there were extreme, there were forces in Israel who wanted to attack Lebanon. The United States was concerned, as it always gets concerned in Middle Eastern wars, that its larger regional and international interests would start to be impacted. Biden became very concerned, I think, at the comments by some Israeli leaders that ‘We should actually reduce our effort against Hamas and attack Hezbollah now. We've always wanted to do that. This is a window of international acceptance’. But Israel would go through an unprecedented amount of damage. And, of course, so would Lebanon. That's the kind of war that Biden went to Israel to prevent. On the surface, it looked like he was there to support Israel. And he was. But you'll notice that it wasn't him who was embracing Netanyahu. Netanyahu embraced Biden. Netanyahu desperately needed that sign.

SEAN: Hm.   
  
IAN: But what was going on politically was that once the United States, American president is there, if Israel does something right away after the president is there, it implicates America as if America had told Israel, yes, attack Lebanon. And that is not something that an Israeli government can do. It cannot betray America so completely. So that's one thing that we have to understand. The question of whether this catastrophe is going to become a super catastrophe.

SEAN: But, but still, I feel like you saw from the, the bear hug with Netanyahu to President Biden urging caution about the civilian death toll in Gaza, you did see a sort of progression in his approach, where he started to caution and warn Netanyahu more in, say, month two, month three.

IAN: You used the word caution. I think that's right. I said at the beginning, the United States turned on the green light. When Biden went there and started talking about war crimes, international law. You have to respect international law. He's turning on the yellow light. The caution light. It got brighter and brighter, but it's not red yet. And that's the question: when is it going to turn red? Now, when the United States plays footsie with U.N. security resolutions and seems to maybe be prepared to support one, even if it has…doesn't have any teeth. It's brightening that yellow light when they allow a resolution to go through the calls for a ceasefire, or when they tell Israel they're going to. That's a red light. That's why those resolutions constantly being proposed at the U.N. Security Council are very important. They’re important because we can see how close the United States is to ending the war.

SEAN: From all the history that you carry around with yourself, that you've lived through, that you've studied, what will Netanyahu do to trigger the red light?

IAN: I don't think it's necessarily anything that Netanyahu himself will do that he hasn't already done. Uh, I think part of it will be the realization that you can't end the war in the Gulf with the Houthis until the Gaza War ends, and you can't eliminate the probability of escalation in the Gulf or in Lebanon until the war ends in Gaza. There is a constant danger. There have been over 350 Palestinians killed in the West Bank since the beginning of this war. These are things that the Biden administration can only lose. It's losing politically already. The progressive wing of the party, uh, is weakening its support for President Biden. That's a crucial issue for him. This is new. We haven't seen that kind of political factor in the equations that presidents have had to solve, uh, in the midst of Middle Eastern wars before. So it's hard for me to predict exactly how important it is, but I'm pretty sure that it will mean something as this election cycle moves forward.

SEAN: I'm glad you brought up the election, because I do wonder if this isn't resolved by November, what it looks like if President Biden loses the election.

IAN: If he loses the election. I mean, I don't see any real difference in a way.  
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
IAN: That is to say, the Trump administration. If you look at the Trump administration and the Obama administration, the trajectory of Israeli policies and the status of peace negotiations was the same. They didn't go anywhere. And and the settlement continued, and the prospects for peace were zero. So I don't really see much of a difference between the second Obama administration and the Trump administration. And I don't see much difference in the Biden administration. The Biden administration was doing nothing to advance a peace process. This is getting into another topic. But when this war ends, the when the shooting stops, there will be a renewal of a of a pseudo peace process because the image of a two state solution, peace process is politically valuable to a president, even if he knows that it never will be success. The idea of doing something, of seeming to do something, of keeping alive, the image of that possibility is very important, not just for the United States, but for Israeli governments, for the Palestinian Authority, which gets hundreds of millions of dollars in aid every year from the international community, and from peace process industry. You know, people like me and foundations who are constantly trying to find ways to bring peace or at least raise money for their organizations in the hopes that those that peace process will work. But that's another that's the question of, you know, we're we're going to see a diplomatic theater about a four year diplomatic theater once this, uh, shooting stops.

SEAN: Do you think there could be a outcome from this particular conflict that would prevent another one in 3 or 4 years that could break this cycle that you've alluded to, where eventually the United States or the UN has to step in and say, ‘That's enough.’

IAN: Well, I think so. I think it's possible. I don't think it's very likely, but it's possible. Uh, and one of the things there is, I could be surprised by the effect of the devastating losses that Israel has experienced and the effect of the global isolation that Israel is going to experience as a result of the impressions that most of the globe has about what Israel is doing in Gaza. Those two things could impact Israeli public opinion in a way that produces a leadership that rejects what's called the mowing the lawn strategy, that every three years we need a war not to convince the Arabs that we can live with, but just to destroy their capabilities, to attack us for another couple of years. Now, if that were abandoned, Israel would have to come up with an actual image of peace.

SCORING <Sharp & Clear>

IAN: There are so many issues and they're so emotional. Uh, the pain that Jews and Palestinians have been suffering is incalculable. And my hope is that the ignorance which most people have about this conflict can be reduced and that people can start to grapple with the real issues and not the issues that arise from fantasies that they have about this conflict.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Professor Emeritus Ian Lustick. Political science, U Penn. He’s got a whole bunch of books about this conflict, most recently *Paradigm Lost: From Two State Solution to One State Reality.*

Our program today was produced by Isabel Angell and Amanda Lewellyn. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, mixed by David Herman, and fact checked by Laura Bullard with help from Hady Mawajdeh and Haleema Shah.

*Today, Explained* is honored to now air on Connecticut Public Radio, WNPR. Hello, Susan! Thank you for listening.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]