



Israel-Palestine Relations: Complexities and Challenges



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Introduction

The first public demand for a separate Jewish Homeland was made in the 1897 First Zionist Congress and 1917 Balfour Declaration. After that, many Jews started to migrate to Israel. However, the implementation of a Mandate for Palestine, by the then British Government, gave rise to parochial conflict between Jews and Arabs.¹ The problems grew and in 1947, post the termination of British Government's mandate, the United Nations General Assembly came up with Resolution 181 (1947)— the UN Partition Plan of Palestine.² However, the conflict of 1947-1949 laid the bedrock for subsequent Arab-Israel Wars in 1967 and 1973.

Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the most long-lasting conflicts in modern history, and numerous efforts were undertaken to resolve this contentious and complex issue. The concept of a 'two-state solution' for Israel-Palestine visualises an independent state of Palestine and Israel with a boundary marked by

Key Points

- The Israel-Palestine Conflict is one of the longest standing conflicts because the problem is deep-rooted in history.
- In 1948, due to a failed endeavour to split up Palestine into two states by the UN, war broke out between Israel on one side and a coalition of Arab nations on the other side.
- Amidst the chaos and confusion, Israel declared Independence on 14 May 1948, thus formally establishing the state of Israel.
- Presently, the cause of Palestine has been hijacked by terrorist organisations and has made it challenging to achieve peace.
- Terrorism and Violent Extremism has no place in society; hence all terrorist organisations operating in West Bank and Gaza Strip must cease to exist.
- More confidence-building measures should be undertaken in order to promote peace and prosperity in the region.



the river Jordan. However, despite a long-term peace process, Israelis and Palestinians have failed to reach an agreement. In 1974, a UN resolution on the “Peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine” called for “two States, Israel and Palestine ... side by side within secure and recognised borders” together with “a just resolution of the refugee question in conformity with UN resolution 194.” Progress was made towards a two-state solution with the 1993–1995 Oslo Accords.

In 2002, the Arab League adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, which agreed to establish an independent, sovereign Palestinian State in areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, comprising Palestinian diaspora since June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.³ In 2003, US, EU, Russia, and the UN laid a roadmap for a two-state solution. It is believed that eminent Israelis and Palestinians propagated an informal peace pact in 2003 known as the Geneva accord. In 2005, Israel pulled out its settlements and troops from the Gaza strip, while controlling its borders, seashore, and airspace. Following Palestinian legislative elections of 2006, US, EU, Russia and UN exerted influence on the Palestine Authority on its assurance of non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements. When Hamas (militant and nationalist organisation) took over Gaza in 2007, Israel forced a blockade. This failure of the peace process led to the Israel-Palestine Conflict in 2008.

Operation Guardian of the Walls

A fresh escalation in the Israel-Palestinian Conflict was seen on 10 May 2021, which led to loss of many life and property until a ceasefire came into effect on 21 May; there were protests and riots, police riot-control measures, rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and airstrikes of Israel targeting the Gaza Strip.

The court cases, evicting about 300 Palestinian people from Sheikh Jarrah, caused this turmoil in Palestine. Sheikh Jarrah— the Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem facing imminent Israeli eviction, was once an open orchard lying less than a kilometre north of the ancient walls of Jerusalem’s Old City. In the early twentieth century, wealthy Palestinian families moved to build modern houses in this area, escaping the narrow streets and the hustle-bustle of their air-tight homes in the Old City.⁴ Sheikh Jarrah derives its name from the personal physician of Islamic General— Saladin. He was the first to settle there when Muslims captured the city from Christians in 1187 AD. Previously, the Palestinians were expelled from the neighbourhood in 2002, 2008, and 2017. The current removal attempts are based on the 1970 Israeli law that allows Jews to reclaim East Jerusalem land inhibited by them before 1948, however no similar law exists for Palestinians that allows them to reclaim homes from which they were ousted.



On 10 May, Hamas (along with PIJ) launched hundreds of rockets from the Gaza strip towards Israeli towns and cities, targeting dense civilian population in the cities, towns and villages. Jerusalem (Israel's capital) and the Tel Aviv metropolitan area were also targeted.⁵

Initially, about 150 rockets were fired, wherein two residents of Ashkelon were killed, and dozens of others were injured. The Israeli Government further stated that the attacks perpetrated by the Hamas terror organisation essentially constituted a double war crime—indiscriminate attacks on a civilian population originating from within a civilian population. Moreover, the moral responsibility for this worsening of the situation and those injured or killed on both sides falls ultimately on Hamas and other terrorist organisations.⁶

Furthermore, this operation ended on 21 May 2021 when Hamas and Israel accepted the ceasefire. The official statements by the security cabinet noted that:

The Security Cabinet, this evening (Thursday, 20 May 2021), unanimously accepted the recommendation of all of the security officials, the IDF Chief-of-Staff, the head of the ISA, the head of the Mossad and the head of the National Security Council to accept the Egyptian initiative for a mutual ceasefire without pre-conditions, to take effect at a time to be determined. (Prime Minister's Office statement, Israel Foreign Ministry Press Release dated 20 May, 2021).⁷

Response of the International Organisations

In comments to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva — which stopped short of supporting a call for an international probe into the escalation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel – Michelle Bachelet Jeria, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, condemning the indiscriminate rocket attacks by Hamas remarked that, such attacks may constitute war crimes “if found to be indiscriminate and disproportionate in their impact on civilians and civilian objects.⁸ United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the UNGA meeting on 19 May 2021, ‘urged’ Israel and the Palestinians to call an immediate ceasefire and pledged to launch a natural humanitarian appeal for funding.⁹

The General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) stated that, despite the cessation of Israeli hostilities and the ceasefire in Gaza, a strong commitment to dialogue, relevant UN resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative for a two-state settlement, along with the establishment of an independent state of Palestine within the 1967 lines, with Eastern al-Quds as its capital, are paramount to achieving a ‘just, lasting and comprehensive peace’.



The Organization's participation in the UNGA Emergency Meeting on the situation in the Middle East and Palestine (20 May), at the request of the Muslim, Arab and non-alliance groups, forms part of its ongoing political and diplomatic efforts to draw the international community's attention towards the need to shoulder its responsibility to end Israeli aggression and assault on the Palestinian people, their land and sacred places of worship.¹⁰

Like Turkey and much of the international community, the EU does not recognise Israel's sovereignty on territories it has occupied since 1967. The EU has repeatedly called on Israel to end all settlement activity and dismantle existing ones since 2001. European Union disagrees with the joint statement regarding the Israeli-Palestine conflict as Hungary vetoed the resolution.¹¹

Economic Impact on the Regions at War

For the past century, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has been a significant aspect of the Middle East. Despite billions of dollars exhausted to back, oppose, or try to find a solution to this problem, the conflict has been escalating, with sporadic fierce outbreaks. The Hamas media office estimated the bombardments had caused approx. \$40 million damage to factories as well as the strip's industrial zone and other industrial facilities, in addition to \$22 million damage to the energy sector. Gaza's agriculture ministry estimated around \$27 million damage that included greenhouses, agricultural lands and poultry farms. Israel's manufacturers' association estimated a loss to the economy to be around 540 million shekels (\$166 million) as the south and centre of the country came under intense rocket fire from Gaza. This figure excluded any damage to factories.¹²

As per a study conducted by RAND Corporation, the US in 2015 estimated that, the return to violence would have overwhelmingly adverse economic effects for both Palestinian and Israel; per capita gross domestic product would fall by 46 per cent in the West Bank and Gaza and by 10 per cent in Israel by 2024. The report further added that, a two-state solution provides the best economic outcomes for both Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis would gain over two times more than the Palestinians in absolute terms — \$123 billion versus \$50 billion over ten years. However, the Palestinians would gain more proportionately, with average per capita income increasing by approximately 36 per cent over what it would have been in 2024, versus 5 per cent for the average Israeli.¹³



Impact on the Geopolitical Landscape of the Area

The West Bank and Gaza Strip controlled by Israel, has enabled it to exercise defensive control over the resources in case of an Arab attack. Resultantly, it has also taken a sizeable Arab population under Israeli authority.

For the first time, during the recent conflict, Israel had to simultaneously confront the external enemy, the internal clashes, and mob acts of violence led by young Arabs on the streets of Israeli towns— Lod, Ramallah, Acre and Haifa. This new challenge included Arab youth going on a rampage and setting cars on fire, damaging property, torching synagogues and specifically targeting Jewish houses and property. Israel will have to factor in the internal security and maintenance of law and order in its future external conflicts. Although, the recent point of frictions were located in the West Bank yet Hamas did not confront the Palestinian Authority (PA) Government led by Abbas. There is a virtual power struggle between PA and the Hamas terror group. Moreover, Hamas is trying to project itself as the 'Guardian and Protector' of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem and become the sole leader of the Palestinians. Israel, however, dismissed Hamas as a 'terrorist outfit', an 'unapologetic' enemy which is not concerned at all for making peace with Israel.¹⁴

Authority causes respect, and Israel is the best example of this. Only a few nations like Turkey, Iran, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, etc., basically the Arab World countries, have criticised Israel's recent actions. Due to its military capabilities, Israel is 'a superpower' in the Middle East. Though, the Palestinian cause surely deserves compassion yet no nation openly criticised Israel for its retaliatory artillery and aerial strikes in the Gaza strip. National interests indeed dictates International Relations— all countries neighbouring Israel are Islamic but mainly have divided opinion against Israel. Hamas is a Sunni Islamic terror outfit but enjoys Iran' and Hezbollah' (Lebanon) support, predominately Shi'ite nations. On one hand, it has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and on the other, its relations with other neighbours vis. Syria and Lebanon, are fraught. Outside of its immediate neighbours, the three most significant regional players in the conflict are Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Israel sees Iran as a direct and existential threat, as it has provided significant military and financial backing to Hezbollah, Hamas, and Syria— the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' to Israeli and Western interests in the Middle East.¹⁵

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and many other Islamic countries favours an Arab-Israel alliance to counter China's growing relations with Iran. The US facilitated 'the Abraham Accords', resulting in a series of peace agreements between Israel and Arab- Islamic nations like the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, which have proved a game-changer in the region. The



traditional monarchies of the region consider the growing Palestinian nationalism as a threat to their core national interest. They also view Israel as a helpful ally in the region to counter Iranian and Sunni extremism.¹⁶

Can Long-Term Peace be Expected?

Although, both —Israel and Gaza have welcomed the truce, but most people are of the view that this truce is only for a short period. People believe that life will return to normalcy because this is not the first war, and it will certainly not be the last war.

The Gaza Strip has kept barricades on its borders with Israel and Egypt for the last 14 years that controls the passage of people and goods—one of the main issues for future mediation. On the other hand, Israel aims to limit Hamas' access to weapons, as the militants refuse to disarm. As per the UN, the blockade must end for Gaza's economy to improve.

Some world leaders suggested a long-term two-state solution for the Middle East—a Palestinian state alongside Israel — but maintaining the current calm is the main focus. On the contrary, terrorist organisations have overtaken West Bank and Gaza Strip to advocate the cause of Palestinians. Moreover, all the injustices and insecurities that effects the inhabitants of the region, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, are now so deeply ingrained into their daily life that, no diplomatic move can be a solution.

“The ceasefire in Gaza provides a window of time we must use to change the long-term reality. An important decision is to return to the vision of two states for two people, to strengthen the pragmatic forces and weaken the extremists and end the terror”.¹⁷ The disagreement over historical descriptions has not altered, and it will not. Those who insist on forcing their narrative on the other side or turning the conflict into a religious war cannot accommodate the compromises desired for permanent peace. This argument is also valid for those worldwide who support one side and refute the rights of the other. This trend is very damaging and only reinforces the views of terrorist organisations. National differences cannot be solved through wars and acts of violence, but rather through political resolution, leadership and compromise. Conflict based on religion is not a conflict over rights but a contest against the rights of others to live by their faith. For religious ideologists, there is no tolerance and acceptance. The people of Israel and Palestine should not yield ground to the terrorist organisations. This truce between Israel and Hamas should be seen as an opportunity to move forward.



Recommendations and Way Ahead

Certain short-term and long-term measures which may help to bring peace in the region are enumerated in succeeding paras:

Short-Term Measures

- Hamas, PIJ, and other terrorist organisations must shun the violence and participate in the negotiations. A United Nations Peace Keeping Force with the required directive and mission could be positioned in Gaza to ensure peace. Water supplies, once a hindrance, can now be an incentive for peace. Ecological interdependency between Palestinians and Israelis is not just a fact, but could provide the basis for a roadmap to end the conflict. After the catastrophic death and destruction, there must be assigned and all-inclusive international humanitarian assistance. However, it should not be misused by terrorist organisations. Exchange of Prisoners of War (PoWs) must take place between both sides as Confidential Building Measures (CBMs). Freedom of border-crossings, easing barricades, and civilian & commercial infrastructure development such as a deep-water port, would help people interact. Indeed, the movement of people, goods, commerce, trade, development, and evolving economic prosperity will further ensure people to people contact.

Long-Term Measures

- Strict action against Hamas, PIJ, and other terrorist organisations, though difficult but not impossible, is essential for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. Terrorists must stop using 'incendiary balloons' directed against the agricultural communities. This would stop environmental damage. Hamas' capacity to manufacture or smuggle terror assets must be checked. There must be strict supervision of building materials being imported.
- Financial support to Hamas, PIJ and other terrorist organisations by Iran, Syria, Turkey and Qatar must be monitored and stopped immediately. The Palestinian society in Gaza Strip and West Bank must be freed from the 'sceptical and repressive' Hamas and other terrorist organisations' 'culture of hate and incitement'.

Inventiveness, promises, and purposes are the measures that have not been taken seriously so far. Undoubtedly, it may be challenging to implement all these points, but steps could be initiated in the right direction. However, the time has come to protect the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians. However, neither Hamas is fully finished, nor does the recently concluded truce give any optimism of a long-lasting peace in the area. A peace accord will become



feasible only if realistic leaders on both sides recognise that, ‘the cost of not having an agreement for their people is far greater than the price of terms of the agreement’.

Conclusion

Any successful peace initiative would need to resolve the four core issues that have plagued the peace process— West Bank Borders and Settlement, Israeli Security, Palestine refugees and Jerusalem. So far, there has been little success, and any agreement will have to overcome the following hurdles— *first*, Israel continues to expand West Bank settlements, which Palestinians see as a *de facto* campaign to erase the Palestinian state outright. *Second*, the Palestinians remain politically divided between Fatah and Hamas, PIJ and other terrorist organisations and cannot negotiate jointly. *Third*, it is not clear as to how to bring both the Governments (Israel and Palestinian) to the same table as they are sceptical about each other. Therefore, it is important to find a middle path to solve the conflict as its intensity is growing day-by-day in order to prevent any further loss to life and property.

End Notes

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