

The Middle East in Flames

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Abstract

Seventy-five years since the formation of Israel and some twenty years since 1993 Oslo Accord, it is quite clear that the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer viable. There is no political constituency in Israel to support meaningful Palestinian sovereignty in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The refusal of many in the region to recognise the existence of Israel compounds an already complex situation. That may be the casus belli of the war in Gaza and the ensuing upheaval in the Middle East. The world recognises the humongous death and destruction being inflicted in Gaza as a response to the 07 Oct 2023 Hamas attack, but the failure of the United Nations Security Council to meaningfully intervene and conflicting interests of the many players, including the United States mean there are no easy ways out.

Introduction

The Middle East is up in flames. The Israel-Gaza war threatens to engulf the larger region with the potential to cause incalculable upheaval in global trade and commerce apart from spiking energy costs. The muddle is difficult to comprehend, even for the best of minds in the field of geopolitics. To be able to navigate the current churn and do some justice, relying partly on the author's experiences and understanding gained as the Chief Humanitarian Officer of the United Nations (UN) Interim Force in Lebanon from 2001 to 2002 is a herculean task. Nonetheless, it is a useful point of reference.

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Before sizing up the region and its current turmoil, it is necessary to understand what defines the Middle East and why. What do those in India, for example, understand by commonly referring to the region as the Middle East even though it is to the west? This is important because the commonly known characterisation of the region is not simply an ethno-geographical ensemble but a geopolitical one, defined so from an American point of view and then brought into a wider and accepted usage.

Just like 'The West', the reference to which evokes varying responses. Further back in time, the east/west divide of Europe was largely seen as 'The West' to mean west of the Adriatic Sea and 'The East' (Orient) was east of the Adriatic.¹ In the Cold War era, it denoted liberal democratic capitalist block of nations including the United States (US) and Western Europe in contrast to the communist regimes of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Eastern Europe. But in today's post-Cold War era, the term as 'The US led West' denotes the Eurozone [mostly North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members] and countries like Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan are pitted against the Russia-China axis. Interestingly, today while 'The West' is somewhat recognisable, 'The East' is harder to define. A more divisible set of terms is the poorer 'Global 'South' in a climate change conundrum railed against the rich 'Industrial North'.

The Middle East

The Middle East generally refers to the region that stretches from Egypt to Iran and from Turkey to Yemen. With an area over twice the size of India but less than a third of the population, the 18 odd countries in this region attract far more attention than the rest of the world if seen from an energy, war and terror standpoint. As the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam centred on Jerusalem, it has a built-in theatre for war. Fights for control over the Suez Canal for trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and for control over its rich oil and gas reserves have added to their woes. There have been long held undercurrents of disaffections and grievances, of injustice and exploitation; perpetually simmering and periodically ignited.

For a long time, the region was referred to by the US as the Near East with Far East extending to Japan. Of course, those in India would generally call it West Asia. There is a Near East South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies in Washington DC, where the author attended their apex level Senior Executives Programme in 2014. The author would go on to discuss possible conflict scenarios involving rites of passage in the Persian Gulf, little knowing that it would become a reality and play out in 2023 with the Iranian proxy, Houthis of Yemen, attacking commercial shipping through the Red Sea and throwing global supply chains off-gear once again. It had just barely recovered from the COVID pandemic.

Culling from experiences in the region the author believes that some understanding about Lebanon is helpful in order to discern the volatility in the broader region. It is premised on the fact that Lebanon, for a tiny sliver of a country with just about eight-nine mn population, has a very complex cocktail of religions; an explosive mix of Maronite Christians, Shiites, and Sunni Muslims in almost equal proportions and add to that the Druze, the Armenians and the Syrians. Palestinians numbering between 1,70,000 to 2,00,000 housed in 26 camps which are a state within a state are a crucial factor.² Since the Black September events of 1970, when the Palestinians were evicted from Jordan following their attempts to assassinate King Hussein and consequently relocate to these 26 camps, the politics of the Middle East have played out of Lebanon to a very great extent. Unlike Qatar, which is playing a larger-than-life role in negotiations with Hamas, or Saudi Arabia and Jordan who are doing a tricky balancing act in the Gaza conundrum, or Turkey and Iran which have their own cards to swing or sway the outcome, Lebanon sits right across, in the heart of the theatre.

Lebanon shares a 130 km long border with Israel along the heavily fortified Blue Line, is home to the most powerful of Iran's Axis of Resistance, the Hezbollah. It has suffered a long ruinous occupation of its southern region by Israel from 1975-1998, and fought a damaging war in 2006 which ended with no clear winners (though Hezbollah claimed victory). Today, Lebanon is in economic ruins and political atrophy, without a fully empowered government since the 2020 Beirut port explosion that killed over 200 people. The fact that when it comes to the Gaza war, the force majeure

is not the state of Lebanon but rather the non-state but far more potent and powerful Hezbollah, is a pointer to the complexities that confront the peace negotiators.

In the beginning of this millennium, it was the stunning events of 9/11 that ignited the Middle East region once again. Afghanistan is not part of the traditional Middle East. But the war on Al Qaeda moved from Afghanistan westward to Iraq in 2003 as part of President George Bush's 'Global War on Terror' citing stockpiling weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein, an accusation never substantiated to date.

The unravelling of Iraq provided an opening to Iran, the Shia force majeure to make a major push into Iraq. A Shia majority country, Iraq was till then ruled by Saddam, a Sunni dictator who was vehemently against any sectarian fundamentalism.³ Iran strengthened its intelligence and operation support network through the Iranian revolutionary Guards extending it to Syria, a Sunni majority but ruled by an Alawite (a Shia variant) Bashar al-Assad, and link up with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and Houthis in Yemen. Ranged against this Shia push, the Sunni efforts to contain Iran is spearheaded by two competing epicentres Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the former as the claimant to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and the latter as the keeper of its holiest sites Mecca and Medina underpinned by Petro-dollars. Both are in the American orbit though.

It was only a matter of time before the Al Qaeda would mutate to a more radical and violent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria which at one time established a caliphate over vast stretches in North-Western Iraq and Eastern Syria.⁴ It would wreck devastation, inflicting violence hitherto unknown and unthinkable. The Tajik Islamic State (IS) cell that targeted US and NATO military bases in Germany in 2020, or the twin police operations targeting IS financiers and online recruiters in Spain in 2022, to recent riots in Sweden, France and Belgium as well as in parts of East Asia testify to the ability of IS terrorist organisers to plan, communicate and train in the relative safety of the group's enclaves in Syria and Iraq.⁵

Post COVID, the Middle East was in the cusp of a historic turning point. The Israel United Arab Emirates (UAE) deal and the first flight from Tel Aviv landing in Abu Dhabi on 31 Aug 2020,⁶ was a surprising ray of hope in an otherwise complex and gloomy scenario. Saudis welcomed it while Turkey and Palestinian Authorities condemned it. So did Israel's arch enemy Iran. However, this deal with UAE could have led Israel to work with more countries like Oman and Sudan for normalisation of relations and cooperation ushering in greater calm in the Middle East. But that was not to be, as the calm was shattered on 07 Oct 2023.

The Belligerents

The Hamas ignited it with a surprise lightning raid on 07 Oct, killing an estimated 1,200 Israelis and taking over 250 hostages. Israel took time to absorb the shock, plan out its response and decided to go the whole hog 'To finish Hamas in Gaza' with an unrelenting air campaign followed by a devastating ground assault.

It was a matter of time before the wider band of brothers or as Iran terms them as 'Axis of Resistance', who espouse the cause of Palestine or harbour anti-American, anti-Semitic sentiments, to join the conflagration. Hezbollah was the first to jump in, launching rocket barrages from its strongholds in South Lebanon. Four months on, it appears that Hezbollah is keen to keep its actions symbolic and restrained, fully aware of the devastation a full-scale offensive by Israel can cause, learning from its experiences of 2006. To be fair, Hezbollah is far more organised, armed and financed than 18 years ago. It is also wiser.

The Tehran-aligned militias have previously carried out waves of missile and drone attacks on Saudi and UAE oil-processing facilities,⁷ hurting Washington's security-for-oil relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi due to the perceived lack of a substantial US military response. That perception altered after three American service members were killed in an unmanned aerial drone attack on a base in Northeast Jordan on 28 Jan 2024. Since then the US has been conducting targeted air and drone strikes on Iran aligned militias in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The world is terrified by the potential for this violence to escalate and spill into a wider regional conflict leading to an open and above-the-surface war between the US backed Israel and Iran.

Israel: Victim or Villain?

While there was immediate condemnation of the 07 Oct massacre of Israelis, soon the West witnessed huge, and at times, violent demonstrations on the streets and in universities, calling for an immediate ceasefire and justice for the Palestinians. Carefully choreographed images of Israeli aerial bombardment and tanks rolling in were pitched against an unarmed Palestinian civilian population bearing the brunt with their homes destroyed and hospitals overwhelmed with the dead and the injured. Hapless people were seen rummaging through concrete rubble with bare hands to pull out their dear ones, invariably babies and elderly women. Blacked out are the labyrinth of tunnels that open into schools, hospital complexes and apartment blocks, swarming with assault rifles, grenades and rockets. Hamas fighters were nowhere to be seen, as if they were ghosts.

These images evoke shock and disbelief. The ghastly and barbaric attack of 07 Oct when Hamas fighters rampaged through barely awake civilians in sleepy Kibbutz or butchered and raped hundreds of youths who were in a music festival has been pushed to the background. The victim of the 07 Oct carnage is suddenly the villain. Cries of 'From the River to the Sea... Palestine will be free'⁸ rent the air as tens of thousands march down the streets of New York, London, Berlin and Paris. The protests are well organised and generously funded. Who funds them?

The Negotiators

In the aftermath of the 07 Oct Hamas attack, many countries, leaders and the UN have been calling for a calm and immediate ceasefire. Four months down the line, most of the Gaza Strip is a wasted, mangled, bombed-out urban landscape with over 28,000 dead and more than half of its 2.3 mn population in makeshift tent shelters or in UN Relief and Works Agency schools and facilities. The need for mediation is urgent.

The US has taken the lead with shuttle diplomacy. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been jetting across the region to negotiate with all stakeholders who have an influence. Foremost among them are Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan.

Qatar is walking a fine line when it comes to its foreign policy, playing the 'Switzerland of the Middle East' and keeping doors open to all comers. In the past, Qatar has acted as an interlocutor between the international community and the Taliban in Afghanistan (who also have political offices in Doha), between the US and Iran, and even Russia and Ukraine. Qatari-led mediations succeeded when more than 100 captives, mostly women and children, were released during a weeklong cease-fire in Nov in exchange for the release of 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. However, Qatar has been home to Hamas' political leadership since 2012, and some believe it was somehow complicit in Hamas' attacks.

Egypt brings a great deal to the table as it controls the Rafah crossing, the only official entry point into the Gaza Strip not controlled by Israel. The Egyptian military has had an enduring interest in the Gaza Strip since it initially occupied it for almost two decades after Israel's independence in 1948, and it has remained finely attuned to the area's security environment. Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups have used a network of tunnels from Gaza into Egypt to smuggle weapons into Gaza, and Palestinian fighters have passed through them to travel onward for military training in Lebanon and elsewhere.

NATO member Turkey's role as a mediator, though strengthened by its close ties with Qatar and long-standing relationships with both Israel and Hamas— is increasingly vulnerable to public opinion. The Saudi-UAE axis watches from the sidelines while making high decibel noise to satisfy the restive crowds at home. They need Israel's sophisticated security and surveillance platforms to police their own population and Israel's friendship to maintain their cordial relations with Washington to sustain their oil trade. The Abraham Accords signed in Sep 2020 is still a work in progress, though in pause right now.

Prognosis

Will Israel succeed in eliminating Hamas? That is a difficult war aim to achieve. Hamas has its presence in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and a host of other Islamic nations. Qatar and Turkey provide sanctuary to its political wing leaders. The US-led 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan lasted 20 years and left

approximately 69,000 Afghan security forces killed, along with roughly 51,000 civilians and 51,000 militants. The US lost 2,400 of its soldiers. Yet Taliban is firmly back in the saddle.

So most probably, it may morph into another frozen war with Gaza Strip turned into mini enclaves and Israel forced to prosecute a covertly targeted war personally directed against Hamas leaders, home and abroad.

The more difficult and enduring question is the future of Palestine. Almost everyone in public espouses a 'Two-State Solution', outlined in the 1993 Oslo Accord.⁹ But behind closed doors, there are many nuances to the oft-parroted solution. The Palestinian Authority that replaced the Palestinian Liberation Organisation to administer the two-parcels (West Bank-Gaza) self-ruled Palestine has lost all credibility. Its Fatah faction¹⁰ that rules the West Bank is variously accused of corruption, nepotism, a laid-back ageing leadership and above all, suspected by the hot-blooded militants, to be in cahoots with Israelis. The alternative, Hamas, that had seized Gaza in 2007, may have run out of options. Palestine as a full-fledged state never existed in the past and may never have a future. The Middle East is destined to remain in ferment.

India has a big stake in the outcome of this bruising war. It has strong defence and security ties with Israel. At the same time, it has been a traditional supporter of Palestinians and their humanitarian cause. There are around eight-nine mn Indians working or doing business in the Middle East.¹¹ It needs secure energy supplies from the region and a safe Red Sea-Suez route for its exports to Europe. India has to navigate these choppy waters with the utmost caution and statecraft.

Endnotes

¹ <https://politics.stackexchange.com/>

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³ Saddam Did Not Create ISIS: Getting the Terrorist Group's Origin Story Right By Samuel Helfont and Michael Brill April 20, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issues/2024/103/1>

⁴ Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State October 28, 2019 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>

⁵ Attacks across Europe by Jason Burke: <https://www.theguardian.com/tone/analysis>

⁶ Press Trust of India 31 August 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/>

⁷ Saudi Aramco Hit by Houthi attack, By Aziz El Yaakoubi and Maha El Dahan Reuters, March 26, 2022

⁸ What Does 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' mean? By Brishti Basu, CBC News, Nov 21, 2023

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/>

¹⁰ "Understanding Palestine's political divide between Hamas and Fatah" by Konner McIntire The National Desk, October 20 2023

¹¹ "West Asia is staring at an economic crisis. India has to be prepared", Opinion by Kabir Taneja Apr 24, 2020, Hindustan Times; www.fsi.mea.gov.in, October 10, 2019