

Decades Of Strife: Unravelling the Current Dynamics of Israel-Palestine Conflict and the Role of UN

Introduction

The Islamist Palestinian group Hamas, recognised as a terrorist organisation by the European Union and United States (US), attacked Israel from the south using Gaza as a launchpad on Oct 7, killing 1,300 people in towns and army bases.^[1] The Arabs and the Jews have long been in a conflict over the possession of Jerusalem, which has resulted in seven major wars.^[2] Recent events in the Middle East are the result of decades of fighting, destabilising the region. The aspirations of the Palestinians for their own state conflicts Israel's concerns about security in what the latter has long seen as a hostile environment.

Origins of the conflict: A brief history

With the proclamation of the modern state of Israel on May 14, 1948 by its founding father David, Ben-Gurion, the Jews who were fleeing persecution and seeking a national home on territory they claimed had strong ties over generations found a safe haven.^[3] Palestinians refer to the founding of Israel as the *Nakba*, or tragedy, which stopped them from achieving their aspirations of forming a state and led to their dispossession. Approximately 700,000 Palestinians, or half of the Arab residents of what was British-ruled Palestine, fled or were driven away from their homes and sought refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, during the conflict that followed.^[4] Israel, a close US ally, denies evicting Palestinians and claims that it was assaulted by five Arab states the day after it was formed.^[5]

The Palestinians who stayed in the war comprise the Arab Israeli community, which accounts for around 20 per cent of Israel's population.^[6] Ever since the genesis of hostilities, seven major wars have occurred. The modern iteration of the conflict started when Israel unleashed a Six-Day war as a precautionary measure against Egypt and Syria in 1967. Over the years, five wars broke out beginning in the noughties and lasting up to 2021, where Israel's Iron Dome was tested for the first time. The latest and present iteration marks seventh such instance of conflict between the two.^[7]

The United Nations Partition Plan

On May 15, 1947, the United Nations established the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), with representatives from 11 countries as the Palestine question reached the United Nations (UN) shortly after the end of the Second World War.^[8] On Aug 31, a report was released by UNSCOP after a survey of the Palestine situation, which advocated the establishment of autonomous Arab and Jewish states, with Jerusalem placed under international administration.^[9]

On Nov 29, by a vote of 33 to 13, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution advocating the acceptance and implementation of the Plan of Partition, which obligated the states to provide full civil rights to all persons within their borders, regardless of race, religion, or gender. This resolution gained support from both the US and the Soviet Union.^[10] The five Arab League members who were voting members at the time voted against the Plan. The Plan was endorsed by the Jewish Agency, the fledgling Jewish state, and practically all Jews in Palestine cheered.

The Palestinian Arab leadership, as well as most of the Arab populace, flatly rejected the partition plan. During a meeting in Cairo in November and December 1947, the Arab League supported a military solution to the dispute. Meanwhile, Britain expressed its support for the partition proposal but refrained from implementing it, citing Arab opposition.^[11] Following the General Assembly's resolution, a civil war erupted, and the UN plan remained unimplemented. A plan was suggested to divide Palestine into three parts comprising a Jewish state, the City of Jerusalem, and an Arab state which hence would be interconnected by extraterritorial junctions.^[12]

Delving Deep into the UN's Role in Addressing the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Various independent UN experts have denounced the deadly violence ushered upon the Israeli civilians as well as indiscriminate and lethal attacks unleashed on Palestinian civilians in Gaza. They also condemned a further escalation citing the illegal blockade having devastating consequences for the civilian population as a whole.^[13] UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, condemned the attack by Hamas but added: "The Palestinian people have been under tyranny for 56 years". His remarks at a UN Security Council meeting sparked a spat between Israel and the UN as he stated that the Hamas attack on October 7 "Did not happen in a vacuum," causing outrage in Israel.^[14]

Historically, the UN's role in the Israel-Palestine dispute has not been particularly helpful with regards to averting Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians and addressing their legitimate grievances. This partly can be attributed to the considerable influence wielded by the US as a veto power and as a significant contributor of the UN and its various agencies.^[15] It is equally important to note that ever since Israel was formed and progressed towards its stability, leading to instability of whole region, the UN was largely marginalised from the political dynamics of the issue. UN peacekeepers were stationed on the Israeli-Egyptian front, yet the UN was kept away from political decision making. Simultaneously, the UN Refugee Works Agency, established to support refugees until their eventual return home, saw limited involvement of the UN as a viable institution in political decision-making processes.^[16] Moreover, the US has consistently pushed to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict via bilateral means, by swiftly side-lining the UN. This is evident in the UN's inability to enforce resolutions, including those advocating for a two-state solution and the prevention of illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine.^[17] The US is one of the five countries with veto power over any measure taken by the council that they do not agree with. On a regular basis, those powers exercise control over areas of influence.^[18] Countries big and small are aware of the game. Non-permanent council nations are also wary of publicly attacking powerful countries. Even if a Security Council statement is approved, the impact will be minimal unless there is a strong diplomatic backing and a willingness on all sides to lower tensions.

During an emergency session on the situation in the Middle East held on Oct 27, the UN General Assembly called for an immediate and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities. It also insisted on unobstructed delivery of essential assistance to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip.^[19] The Assembly approved the resolution which called for the immediate and complete adherence of all parties to their international legal obligations, including those outlined in International Humanitarian Law.^[20] The Assembly endorsed the resolution, which called for all parties to comply with their international legal obligations, particularly those stated in IHL, immediately and completely. The Assembly advocated the immediate and unconditional release of all unlawfully detained civilians, underlining the devastating impact of armed conflict on women, children, and other vulnerable civilians, such

as people with disabilities and the elderly. The Assembly underscored that a just resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is achievable solely through peaceful mechanisms aligning with relevant UN resolutions and international law, and based on a two-state solution. It additionally advocated all parties to display utmost caution to prevent further escalation of violence and destabilisation in the region. [21]

A Diplomatic Analysis on India's Evolving Stance on the Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israel-Palestine conflict has triggered a verbal war in India, with numerous parties engaging. These broadly include several state governments, self-professed intellectuals, political opposition, student unions of some universities, and others. Ever since the war broke out, there have been several rallies in India to support Hamas and Palestine centring around the condemnation of Israel's military actions, by disregarding the actions of Hamas. [22]

In his initial statement regarding Hamas's strike on Oct 7, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his profound dismay and declared himself "deeply shocked" by the attack, which he swiftly identified as a "terrorist' action". [23] Further, the Prime Minister spoke to his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, over the phone and said, "India stands firmly with Israel...strongly and unequivocally condemns terrorism..." [24] Both these set of comments are similar, in that both condemn terrorism on a global scale. However, the recent focus on 'a sovereign and viable state of Palestine' has been interpreted as a notable shift in India's position on the conflict. [25] This change comes at a time when India is looking to expand its role in the Middle East. India's initial reaction was perceived as being guided by a combination of humanitarian concerns for the casualties in Israel and the development of amicable relations during the administrations of Modi and Netanyahu. Nonetheless, as the situation unfolds and Arab powers that have remained mainly silent on the Gaza crisis decide to speak out, India may find itself in a tough position. As indicated by the visit of Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, in New Delhi in 2018, India openly supports the Palestinian cause. [26] However, India's global stance and domestic politics have shifted. However, India's geopolitical position and domestic politics have undergone changes. It not only maintains a strong alliance with Israel but is also now a close strategic partner of the US, a staunch Israeli ally. Stability in the Middle East holds significance for India due to its relations with Arab nations and the substantial Indian diaspora living and working in the region. Additionally, given India's own vulnerability to attacks by jihadist terrorist groups, it comprehends Israel's security concerns. Modi's statement implies that India now views its relationship with Israel not merely friendly but also indispensable for its long-term strategic interests.

End Notes

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

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[21] Ibid.

[22] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/blunt-frank/the-war-of-words-in-india-on-the-israel-palestine-conflict/>

[23] “In India’s Second Statement On Israel-Gaza War, A Balancing Act, NDTV World, October 13, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-latest-news-ndtv-explains-indias-viable-palestine-message-after-support-for-israel-4478662>

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Manjari Chatterjee Miller, “Modi’s Statement on the Israel Crisis Demonstrates a Transformed India-Israel Bilateral Relationship”, Council on Foreign Relations, October 9, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/modis-statement-israel-crisis-demonstrates-transformed-india-israel-bilateral-relationship>

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Article uploaded on 04-01-2024

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