

Gaza Under Fire: Tracing the Evolution of India's Response to the Palestine Question

Introduction

After World War I, the United Kingdom (UK) took over the region known today as Palestine, then home to a Jewish minority and an Arab majority. The tension between the two religious groups escalated as the UK was tasked with creating a 'national home' for Jewish people in Palestine under the Balfour Declaration of 1917.^[1] The 1920s and 1940s, saw an exodus of thousands of Jews to Palestine, many of them fleeing the Holocaust. This exacerbated tensions between the Arabs and British authorities.^[2] In 1947, the United Nations (UN) proposed a resolution recommending the region be separated into two states, Israel and Palestine, with Jerusalem being recognised as an international city.^[3] In 1948, Israel declared statehood and expanded its territory to 77% of that allocated by the UN, leading to the 1948 conflict with neighbouring Arab nations.^[4] This declaration triggered the exodus of thousands of Palestinians, who refer to it as '*Al Nakba*' or the 'Catastrophe'^[5] from Gaza and the West Bank. Israel, through conflict and negotiations, retained control over most of the territory, while Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt controlled Gaza.^[6] The subsequent decades witnessed continued escalation of strife and humanitarian crises, and peace efforts yielded limited success. Israel's occupation of the West Bank, construction of settlements, and competing claims over Jerusalem persist, with international disputes regarding their legality.^[7] Although peace negotiations were initially promising, internal and external factors disrupted these efforts, leading to a protracted conflict that continues to shape the region's dynamics. In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian legislative election, and started administering Gaza.^[8] By preventing subsequent elections and systematically developing its armed wing, Hamas claims to represent Palestinian cause, but its barbaric actions on 07 Oct have brought greater miseries to the people of Gaza.^[9] Hamas is designated as a terrorist group in the United States of America (US), Canada, European Union (EU), Japan and Israel, but controls Gaza (post Israeli disengagement in 2005) and has actively engaged its armed wing in radical militant activities.^[10]

Current Escalation and Global Response

On Oct 7, the Palestinian radical Islamist group, Hamas, attacked Israel by entering into 22 Israeli cities and army posts; kidnapping residents and soldiers.^[11] According to the Israeli military, Hamas killed over 1,400 people and injured 2,800 more. In Gaza, Israel's retaliatory strikes have killed at least 8,000 Palestinians, including 447 children, and injured more than 20,000 civilians.^[12] The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that the number of people displaced in the Gaza Strip has increased by 30%, leaving 1.4 million people displaced.^[13] The OCHA also notes that Gaza only has enough food stock for the next 11 days and a reduction of 92% in water access from when the hostilities began.^[14] In addition to Israeli airstrikes on Gaza, the Israeli authorities have announced a 'complete siege' of the enclave to eradicate Hamas.^[15] With all supplies barricaded by Israeli troops, an overcrowded, impoverished and struggling Gaza finds itself in a blackout zone with no communication or internet services being allowed by Israeli forces.^[16] Further complicating the geopolitical ramifications of this conflict are the persistent suspicions that the attack was orchestrated by Iran, despite Iran's Supreme Leader denying any involvement with Hamas.^[17] The attack effectively caught the Shin Bet, Israeli domestic security services, the nation's external spy agency Mossad, and the Israel Defence Forces unawares, indicating a worrisome intelligence failure.

The US, EU, and other Western countries have condemned the Hamas attacks on Israel and supported Israel's violent retaliation, with the US providing over USD 260 bn in military and economic aid and promising additional equipment and ammunition.^[18] Conversely, Russia and China have both refused to condemn Hamas and say they are maintaining contact with both sides to the conflict. Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres criticised Hamas but noted that the violent action did not occur "in a vacuum" and pointed to the 56 years of "occupation" of Palestinian territories by Israel.^[19]

Evolution of India's Response to the Palestine Question

India has historically maintained a close relationship with Palestine. In 1974, India distinguished itself as the first non-Arab state to recognise Palestine as a "Legitimate representative" of its people, later receiving full state recognition in 1988.^[20] This enduring association persisted during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, with significant visits between Indian and Palestinian leadership, emphasising India's support for the establishment of an "Independent Palestinian state in a peaceful environment".^[21] Prime Minister (PM) Modi has conveyed India's support to Israel in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict.^[22] Although, PM Modi did not explicitly mention a two-state solution, the Ministry of External Affairs later affirmed India's consistent stance, advocating for "Direct negotiations towards a sovereign, independent, and viable Palestinian state, living securely alongside Israel within recognised borders".^[23] This stance showcases a noteworthy shift, signalling India's quest for a more prominent role in the Middle East, while endorsing Israel's military actions.

For over four decades following its independence, India remained unresponsive to Israel's advances to build closer relations. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru even voted against the proposal for a Jewish homeland in the region at the UN General Assembly, though the resolution was passed and Israel and Palestine were made separate states.^[24] India officially acknowledged Israel's establishment but refrained from initiating formal diplomatic relations. However, defence cooperation between India and Israel began secretly in the 1960s, with India receiving vital military support through clandestine channels during the crises.^[25] Then, when the Soviet Union disintegrated and India's relations with the US improved, Indian posturing towards the Israel-Palestine conflict transformed markedly, with a move towards neutrality on the issue.^[26] After the election of PM Modi in 2014, Indo-Israeli relations witnessed further changes, highlighted with India's abstention on a UN resolution underlining Israel's role in the 2014 Gaza escalation.^[27] India's stance on the conflict had been consistent till 2017, when it changed its stance to a significantly neutral position on the Israel-Palestine conflict.^[28] This has been accompanied by an improvement in Indo-Israeli relations, particularly in the economic and defence fields. Currently, India is the largest importer of Israeli armaments and Israel ranks among India's major arms suppliers, as of 2022.^[29] In addition, bilateral trade relations have grown tremendously making India Israel's third largest trading partner, after China and the US.^[30]

PM Modi's statement regarding Israel and his swift support to the Israelis remain significant. His comments embody the value India places on its relationship with Israel. India acknowledges Israel's critical role in safeguarding strategic Indian interests, regional stability and a carefully curated security order. However, India now finds itself in a unique position, one that requires careful balancing and prudence. The major players to be considered in India's strategic nexus for this conflict are the US, Israel and the Arab nations. India enjoys a strong partnership with Israel, as well as a formidable strategic alliance with its ardent supporter, the US. However, India must simultaneously balance its conflicting geopolitical, economic, and cultural interests in the

Arab world, particularly with respect to oil imports from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.^[31] PM Modi's support for Israel may negatively impact India's relations with some Arab nations and harm its strategic interests in the region. Moreover, this stance of the Indian government may also affect the fate of the I2U2 agreement between Israel, India, the US, and the UAE. Indian expatriates in the Gulf region may also encounter social hostility due to these developments. Additionally, the India-Middle East-Europe connectivity corridor, lauded as an alternative to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, may now find itself in a challenging situation with impediments to its construction caused by this alienation of Arab nations.^[32]

Given these strategic considerations, India must reinforce its humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people and offer political support in international institutions for the promotion of a two-state solution, in collaboration with other major nations. Simultaneously, India should continue to foster strategic and economic relations with Israel, while leveraging diplomatic back-channels to counsel Israel in exercising restraint and reaching a ceasefire to end the brutal atrocities being committed in Gaza. India must espouse an approach rooted in the deliberate use of force, democratic co-option, operating within the boundaries of international law and seeking international aid. Historically, India has maintained a rather consistent political position on the Palestinian question and has navigated its strategic interests in the Middle East and beyond accordingly. Any digression from this historical stance would be detrimental to its security interests, global aspirations, and its highly respected image as an inclusive democracy. Therefore, to secure its strategic interests across a variety of dimensions, India must continue to advocate for a two-state solution and support the Palestinian cause, while simultaneously strengthening its relationship with Israel to evolve its own strategic and economic interests.

End notes

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