

Humanitarian Crisis Deepens as War Expands to South Gaza: Evaluating Outcomes against Realities!

The War Expands South: Humanitarian Crisis Deepens

As intense fighting spreads to Southern Gaza, the people of Gaza having being told to evacuate find themselves in deeper crisis, as there is no safe place to go. The truce collapsed on 01 December 2023, with both sides blaming each other for it. Israeli military launches operations in Khan Younis, Gaza's second largest city, declaring it as combat zone, calling it "[The most intense day](#) since the beginning of the ground operation", besides continuing strikes on northern Gaza. Hamas too is responding with rocket fire on border cities of Israel to register its existence. Caught in crossfire, it's a distressing news for hostages and civilians of one of the most populated region of the world, blockaded in a landmass, left with no safe zones.



Although, most rational voices condemn the brutal, barbaric, terror attack by Hamas on 07 October 23, and felt Israeli's actions against Hamas was justified, but the scale, cost and methodology of Israeli response, causing fourteen times more Palestinian civilian casualties (approximately over 16000 in comparison to over 1200 Israelis killed so far) and large scale forced displacement of people has invited global criticism including its closest ally United States, for violation of the [International Humanitarian Law](#). The violence and casualties in West Bank are complicating the situation further.

Despite Israel Defence Forces (IDF) maintaining that "It doesn't target civilians", reports of mounting casualties concerns everyone, including its closest ally USA, which expects Israel to do more to protect civilians in pursuance of its [legitimate military objectives in Gaza](#). After US announced new visa ban on Israeli settlers involved in violence against Palestinians in the West

Bank, Israel responded with assurance of being open to "Constructive feedback" from the US and the United Nations, without altering the pace and methodology of its operations.

Opposing Strategies and Outcomes

As per PM Netanyahu the Israeli objective in this war is to liquidate Hamas completely, ensure that its citizens are never again threatened by an attack from Gaza and ensure the release of hostages. He thinks that it can be done by military action and has pulled back Israeli team from ongoing negotiations in Qatar.

The force level used and the scale of destruction being caused indicates that his undeclared aim is to make Gaza uninhabitable and force Palestinians out of Gaza, as it's extremely difficult to identify Hamas in such heavy population density of Palestinians and selectively destroy them. To minimise own casualties, IDF has chosen the strategy of mass destruction and pulverising targets/buildings alleged as hideouts by standoff attacks, avoiding hand to hand fighting in built up area.

The strategy of Hamas on 07 October was to pick up maximum hostages to be used as bargaining chip, embarrass Israel and provoke it beyond limits to respond disproportionately, causing heavy casualties to innocent Palestinians in Gaza, to put the Palestinian issue from the back burner to forefront, besides inviting global criticism of Israel for human right violations, which seems to have been achieved.

Hamas also expected favourable reaction in their support from Arab countries, radical Islamic countries and organisations to drive a wedge in relationship of some Arab countries, and others, getting closer to Israel. This has not been fully achieved as Arab countries have voiced in favour of Palestinians (not Hamas, in context of its brutal assault violating human rights) and have not intervened beyond diplomatic and moral support.

In terms of outcome, Israel had finished the war in six days in 1967, Yom Kippur war in 19 days, but against Hamas, the war is nearing two months and the obliteration of Hamas is nowhere in sight. Despite Israel's efforts to eliminate Hamas, the group seems to have survived initial onslaught, with only [about 5,000 Hamas fighters](#) killed in the conflict out of 30,000 soldiers of its military wing. Total elimination of Hamas is overambitious because it's an ideology, brewed out of subjugation of population confined into bounds of Gaza, with airspace, maritime space, six exit points and inflow of essential services controlled by Israel.

With growing hatred towards Israel due to unprecedented casualties, the ideology is unlikely to die down. Moreover, many Hamas leaders are outside Gaza, away from striking distance of Israel; hence, will survive even after the destruction of Gaza to annihilate Hamas. While Israel

may be able to comb Gaza to reduce striking capability of Hamas, in the long term it will make itself and its people more insecure to terror attacks within and outside Israel, as the US Defence Secretary rightly warns Israel that [failure to protect Palestinian civilians could lead to 'strategic defeat'](#).

Who will Control Gaza after War?

While Israel is planning to have a buffer zone or a security envelope along Gaza border, inside Gaza to prevent Hamas being positioned on the border, but it may not be easy as world opinion is shifting against Israel and getting inclined towards the two-state solution.

Even Israel's closest ally USA is insisting on the two state solution, which has laid down five principles for the future of Gaza, as its Vice President said "[No forcible displacement of the Palestinian people](#), no reoccupation of Gaza, no siege or blockade, no reduction in territory, and no use of Gaza as a platform for terrorism".

The idea of Gaza to be ruled by Palestinian Authority (PA) has its own drawbacks due to lack of credibility of PA leaders, who haven't had elections after 2005, and they do not represent the people of Gaza. Governance under UN stabilisation Mission till elections are held could be an option, but will Israel agree to completely vacate Gaza remains a question? With an angry population, the Israeli occupation of Gaza will be marred by risk of frequent insurgent attacks.

The Future of Two State Solution?

While Israel and Palestinians both have legitimate right to live, have a homeland, govern and defend themselves, but lack of accommodation of these rights within the boundaries of Israel, West Bank and Gaza Strip remains problematic leading to bloodshed for decades. Every peace propagator including the US is talking of two state solution, but the problem is how to divide that landmass into two states, as both sides want East Jerusalem, because Palestinians can't compromise on al-Aqsa Mosque (Third holiest shrine for Islam) and Jews can't compromise on Temple Mount or Western Wall (the holiest site in Judaism).

The complexities of Palestinian enclaves embedded by Israeli settlements in the West Bank and their continued encroachment, makes it impractical for anyone of them to vacate their enclaves, complicating the situation further.

Way Ahead

The strong support demonstrated by USA to Israel in the initial stages has not allowed direct involvement of any other country into Israel-Hamas war, although groups like Hezbollah and Houthis did show some support with standoff attacks.

The Arab countries have expressed support for Hamas, condemned Israel for violating International Humanitarian laws and excessive civilian casualties, but no one has directly entered the conflict. Considering the responses so far, it appears that this conflict may not expand into larger regional conflict.

This conflict has further divided the global power blocks with USA and Israel getting increasingly isolated. Most of the world and UN is raising concerns for Palestinian cause and unprecedented casualties and USA seems to be doing damage control internally and externally, short of stopping Israeli offensive. The number of women and children killed in less than two months has exceeded two years of Russia Ukraine War, which violates self-defence logic.

The war may end with Israel's combing operations over destroyed Gaza, claimed as victory by Israel. It may work as face saver for Israeli Government, but Israel can neither hope to be safe nor peaceful in the long term. In counter terror operations, people are centre of gravity. The next generation of Hamas will arise, with a frustrated populace demanding revenge. Until a two states solution that is acceptable to both parties is reached, the Israel-Palestine conflict will persist, albeit in an active insurgent form, for an extended period of time.

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