

Israel - Gaza Conflict: Dealing With Colliding Incompatible Realities

Introduction

The war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip is now over ten months old and in spite of the near destruction of Gaza and the deaths of thousands of civilians, there seems to be no end in sight.

The war was unlikely to be contained within the local geography was a given, but the extent to which the war would escape the local geography was subject to speculation. Soon military escalations were spreading across the region. There were clashes on the Israeli-Lebanese border between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), Houthi assaults in the Red Sea disrupting a vital shipping route, attacks by Iranian-aligned militias against United States (US) forces in Iraq and Syria and even missile exchange between Israel and Iran.

There were ups and downs as regards the violent attacks but, within the space of 24 hours at the end of July, Israel took responsibility for the assassination of Fuad Shukr, a top Hezbollah Commander, in Beirut in retaliation for a Hezbollah rocket attack in the Golan Heights, was involved in the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's political leader, in Tehran and the very next day declared that Muhammad Dief had been killed in an air strike in Gaza in mid-July. Observers across the globe feared an escalation which could lead to a catastrophic regional war.

The Reasons for Escalation

Why is Israel now escalating the conflict in such a manner? The country has a lengthy record of assassinating Palestinian leaders and has killed hundreds of Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon and Syria, hence, its latest attacks are not unprecedented.

Israel has also long demonstrated intelligence capabilities that allow it to penetrate deep inside Iran, Syria, Lebanon and some other countries in the region. Apart from that it is confident that the previous rounds of escalation over the past ten months have not led to an all-out regional war. However, on the obverse, eventual de-escalation and containment of a conflict cannot be taken for granted. Actions favouring restraint can be overtaken by events on the ground and public outcry, leading to a wider conflict.[\[1\]](#)

Israel had vowed to eliminate the Hamas leadership and with the double blow now Yahya Sinwar remains the last man standing. The back-to-back assassinations of Shukr and Haniyeh may now trigger Iran, and possibly the other armed proxy groups it backs, to retaliate.[\[2\]](#)

Conversely, the reality may be different as there is also a school of thought stating that Israel may be pushing the limits in its regional actions not because it feels strong but because it feels weak after 07 Oct when Hamas dealt a devastating blow to its deterrence posture. Now, Israel is willing to assume greater risks and absorb higher costs. Assassinations and the ability to carry out precision strikes now form part of its deterrence.[\[3\]](#)

Israel Post 07 October

There is no doubt that Israel's psyche has changed since 07 Oct. Before Hamas's attack, Israel's confidence had reached a peak. It had come to believe that the Arab states would accept Israel even if it had not resolved its conflict with the Palestinians. Further, it felt that it could strike Iran

and its allies virtually without consequences or jeopardising the support it enjoyed from the US.[4]

But within a matter of a few hours on 07 October, that confidence was shattered and transformed into a sense of vulnerability. The Hamas attack overturned the dominant feeling in its people that 'Israel is strong and invincible'.[5]

Many Israelis were furious with their own government for its massive security failures. There soon emerged a trust deficit against the current leadership.

The Israel Defence Forces are stretched on multiple fronts, from Gaza to the West Bank and Lebanon to Syria and also have to counter the threat from Iran and the Houthis in Yemen.[6]

The deep fissures in Israeli society also came out in the open on 28 July when Israeli protesters, including far-right members of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), clashed with military police at an Israeli base where nine soldiers accused of raping a Palestinian prisoner are being held pending their trial. Some Israelis called it one of their most distressing days, while right-wing Israeli lawmakers, including those from the ruling Likud, have justified the rape of Hamas prisoners, claiming it is legitimate due to the atrocities committed during the 07 October attacks.[7]

Then, there is the criticism against Israel which is evident even on the streets of its most ardent supporters, the US and the United Kingdom. The feeling is that innocent Palestinians are being targeted and even hospitals, schools and aid workers are not being spared. A recent example being the death of over 100 students at al-Tabin school in the Daraj in Gaza City.[8]

As the war continues, Prime Minister Netanyahu has come under increasing international pressure regarding the escalating Palestinian death toll and Israel is being accused of genocide. This is damaging its image and reputation. On the other hand, there is domestic pressure to secure the return of all Israelis still held in Gaza as hostages.

A Shadow War Out in The Open

Iran's 13 April attack on Israel was telling. Israel clearly miscalculated when it targeted Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel at a facility in Damascus. It did not anticipate a direct response involving hundreds of drones and missiles launched from Iranian territory at Israel. The war between Iran and Israel was largely fought in the shadows. The Iranians decided to take it out in the open.[9]

While a sophisticated and coordinated defence which included the US repelled the assault, there was a sense of alarm and concern that the next such assault may not be so easily repelled. Israel's response against Isfahan, the site of Iran's uranium conversion plant was calibrated to avoid casualties while showing Israel can penetrate Iran's defences and strike any target it seeks to hit.

But there are concerns that Iran and its proxies are gaining in strength and that Iran may push to accelerate its nuclear capabilities if Tehran believes it is not sufficiently able to deter Israel through conventional means.

The Arab States seem to have gone against the famous adage attributed to the Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406): "Arabs have agreed to always disagree". Palestine is no longer the cause that unites the Arab world and Shia Iran seems to have taken the lead in defending the Palestinian cause. Amongst the reasons being that Syria is almost sapped by its internal conflict

and that Egypt and Jordan, the Arab neighbours of Israel, feel that peace is better than combat. Saudi Arabia's repeated declarations state that there can be no official normalisation with Israel unless a Palestinian state is created. While they criticised Israel for its war in Gaza and demanded an immediate cease-fire, there has been no punitive action.

Conclusion

Impressive tactical military operations and precision strikes against Hamas leadership may give the illusion of victory, but only an enduring peace with the Palestinians can bring real security. The conflict may presently be raging, but at some point, engagement will again be necessary. When that time comes, both sides will need to take into account the sharply changed perceptions of reality in both communities. Unfortunately, most Israelis and Palestinians have hardened their positions motivated both by revenge and survival.

But is the reality of its vulnerability now compelling Israel's actions in Iran, Lebanon and Syria? Even if they increase the risk of a wider regional war, it has a feeling of security due to its backing by the US. This backing was evident even in Japan when the US Ambassador did not attend the Nuclear Day memorial function in Nagasaki as Israel was not invited.

Ending the war in Gaza would certainly help reduce the problems in the region but, the current round of escalation is unlikely to bring a cease-fire deal or the release of the remaining Israeli hostages any closer. Israel believed that integrating itself more fully into the Middle East by striking deals with its Arab neighbours would marginalise Iranian-backed extremist groups but its conflict with the Palestinians remains its biggest hurdle.

The vision for peace will need to engage with these colliding incompatible realities.

Endnotes

[1] "The Israel-Iran Conflict Through an Intelligence Lens," Flashpoint, 9 May 2024,

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[2] "Israel vows to eliminate new Hamas leader as war enters 11th month." The Economic Times, 8 Aug 2024.

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[3] Kaye, Dalia Dassa. "Why Israel Escalates: Risky Assassinations Are a Desperate Bid to Restore Deterrence." Foreign Affairs, 6 Aug 2024.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-israel-escalates>.

[4] *ibid*

[5] *ibid*

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<https://thewire.in/world/explainer-israeli-far-right-lawmakers-defending-soldiers-accused-of-abusing-palestinian-prisoner>.

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