

Seeing the Gaza violence through Singaporean eyes

It's important to remain clear-eyed and cool-headed because the conflict is not a straightforward religious fight but one interwoven with complex nationalist, intra-Palestinian and geopolitical issues.



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War arouses strong emotions. But emotions cloud understanding. Singaporeans should view events in the Middle East with a cool head and clinical eye. Whatever our responses to the humanitarian aspects of the Gaza conflict, it is important to maintain objectivity. In the Middle East there are always more layers of complexity than meets the eye.

In August 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza which it had occupied since the 1967 Six-Day War. Since 2007, Gaza has been occupied by Hamas. Since Israel withdrew, the Israeli Defence Force, in response to attacks launched from the territory, have carried out two operations against Gaza: Operation Cast Lead from December 2008 to January 2009, and Operation Protective Edge from July to August 2014. The current Gaza conflict is the third and is arguably the most politically complex. It has three dimensions:

- The Israel-Palestine dispute;
- Intra-Palestinian politics between Fatah and Hamas; and
- Broader geopolitical shifts in the Middle East.

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

This was the spark that lighted the fire, and it is certainly an intractable dispute that arouses strong passions, but paradoxically, it is the least important of the three dimensions in the current conflict.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is not a black-and-white issue or a simple matter of "justice" on one side and "injustice" on the other. International issues are seldom so straightforward, and certainly never when it is a matter of competing nationalisms. Both sides – with some justification – evoke justice for their claims; both sides have committed egregious injustices. It is a fool's errand to try and draw up a balance-sheet of right and wrong in this tangled mess.

Jerusalem – sacred to all three Abrahamic religions – has been a delicate and emotionally fraught issue for millennia. Jews and Arabs, among others, have lived in Jerusalem for a long time. The Old City was divided into Armenian, Christian, Jewish and Muslim quarters. But outside the Old City's walls, things were not so neat. The property dispute which was the immediate trigger of the current conflict was in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighbourhood in East Jerusalem outside the Old City.

Sheikh Jarrah is predominantly Arab, but Jews have settled and built there at least since the late 19th century and early 20th century, under the Ottomans and subsequently, the British Mandate. Jews began to flee from the district in the mid-1930s to escape pogroms ignited by the Great Arab Revolt against British rule. After Israel's 1948 War of Independence, Jerusalem was divided between Jordan and Israel with Sheikh Jarrah along the no-man's-land between Jordanian East Jerusalem and Israeli West Jerusalem.

Without going into the details of the specific dispute, suffice to say that Jewish property claims in Sheikh Jarrah cannot be brushed aside as entirely without validity, nor are all Arab claims impeccable.

Nothing is ever straightforward in Jerusalem, and things became even more complicated after 1948, when much of Sheikh Jarrah's original Arab population fled and were replaced by Arabs displaced from other areas. A further complication was added when Israel captured and reunited the city during the Six-Day War and annexed East Jerusalem in 1980. The heirs of some of the original Jewish owners then made claims to recover their property now occupied by Arabs who were not



What is left of buildings destroyed in an Israeli air strike early this week in Gaza City's Rimal area. The Israel-Palestine conflict is not a black-and-white issue or a simple matter of "justice" on one side and "injustice" on the other, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

necessarily the original residents of the district.

Jerusalem is Israel's capital. That is a *fait accompli*, recognised *de jure* by the US since 2017 and de facto by almost every other country from much earlier. Most countries keep their embassies in Tel Aviv but their diplomats routinely do business with the Israeli government and Knesset (Parliament) in Jerusalem. There have been several ingenious attempts to find a solution to the status of Jerusalem but all have failed. Without a solution to the status of Jerusalem, it is difficult to envisage a solution to the broader Israel-Palestine dispute.

Within Jerusalem, the locality that Jews and Christians call Temple Mount (also known as Har HaBayit in Hebrew) and Muslims call Haram esh-Sharif, the "Noble Sanctuary" is particularly sensitive, and Al-Aqsa Mosque is even more sensitive. So sensitive is this place that then Defence Minister Moshe Dayan ordered the Israeli flag lowered from Temple Mount within hours of its capture during the Six-Day War and, within days, handed custodianship of Temple Mount back to the Jordanian Waqf while maintaining security control. So sensitive is Jerusalem, that Israel itself prohibits Jews from worshipping on Temple Mount to this day.

Little wonder then, that a property dispute in Sheikh Jarrah quickly escalated into a riot in Al-Aqsa Mosque in which the intervention of the Israeli police further fanned the flames.

The Israeli police behaved clumsily, indeed foolishly. They should have known better because it is a regular tactic of Palestinian leaders dating back to the 1920s, to claim that Jews were endangering Al-Aqsa Mosque when they want – for whatever reason – to stir trouble. This tactic was used as recently as in 2014 and 2015. Yet the Israeli police bungled and fell into an old trap.

Using Temple Mount is also on occasion a tactic used by Israeli leaders for political purposes, as when Mr Ariel Sharon visited in 2000. I suspect that the disarray in Israeli politics – Israel has had four general elections since 2018 and seems to be heading for a fifth – may have had something to do with the clumsy police response.

INTRA-PALESTINIAN POLITICS

On May 5, less than a week before violence broke out, the President of the Palestinian Authority and head of Fatah, Mr Mahmoud Abbas, postponed – meaning cancelled – elections. He did so because Fatah would have lost badly to Hamas on the West Bank. Violence suits Fatah because it distracts attention from

the cancelled elections and its corrupt and incompetent government, and allows Fatah to appear more moderate than Hamas. International aid is an important component of the West Bank's economy.

Hamas, founded in 1987 as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, does not unconditionally recognise the right of Israel to exist and has been designated as a terrorist organisation by the United States, among others. Hamas has been in open violent competition with Fatah since it won a majority in the 2006 parliamentary elections. In 2007, it forcibly expelled Fatah officials from Gaza.

It is one of the ironies of Palestinian politics that opinion surveys have shown that while Hamas is more popular than Fatah on the West Bank, the converse is true in Gaza. In truth both Fatah and Hamas have abysmal records of governance in the territories they control, resulting in the grass always looking greener on the other side to ordinary Palestinians. Violence also suits Hamas because it again distracts from its dismal record of governance, and allows Hamas to posture as heroes of resistance to Israel and defenders of Jerusalem, making Fatah look like weak collaborators.

Resorting to violence as a distraction is nothing new in Jerusalem. What is different this time is the scope and intensity of violence. From May 10 to May 18, the last date for which I have figures, there have been 3,709 rocket or mortar attacks, mainly from Gaza, on civilian targets in Israel. Given the intensity of the attacks, that only 10 Israelis have been killed is testimony to the effectiveness of Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system. Casualties in Gaza have been much higher – to date about 227 killed. This can be attributed to the tactic of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad of launching missiles from civilian buildings and civilian populated areas.

The main victims in all this violent political manoeuvring are ordinary Palestinians. This too is nothing new. Ordinary Palestinians have been consistently used and betrayed by their own leaders and other Arab governments since 1948. Prospects for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine dispute are at best dim. The Oslo Accord – reached almost three decades ago – has long been dead and only awaits a decent formal burial. It is today difficult to envisage more than limited sovereignty for a Palestinian state, if there ever is one.

None of the three parties directly involved on the ground – Fatah on the West Bank, Hamas in Gaza, and

on the Israeli right, the Likud Party under Mr Benjamin Netanyahu who has pulled off electoral victory after victory by manipulating the Palestinian issue – have any real interest in a two-state solution. For all three, a lasting two-state solution would be a political disaster. They are linked in a cynical symbiotic relationship in which the continuation of sporadic low-intensity conflict that can be dialled up or down as necessary serves their interests best.

For Palestinian leaders, peace and full sovereignty means full responsibility. An independent Palestine would quickly cease to be an international *cause celebre* and become just another Third World state with a flag and a seat in the United Nations and little else. Foreign aid would soon dry up unless they display more honesty and competence in governance than they have so far demonstrated. A few years ago, a Palestinian friend, once a senior member of the Palestinian National Council, admitted to me that the Palestinians had failed both in the struggle and in governance. My friend is from Fatah. But his bleak assessment applies to Hamas as well.

THE GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION

This is the most important aspect of the current Gaza conflict, but obscured by the emotional tumult of war. It has been a long time since anyone could credibly argue that a solution to the Palestinian issue was central to peace and stability in the Middle East. The Palestinian issue has steadily moved from the centre to the periphery of geopolitical concerns in the Middle East. Given the intensity of the current conflict in Gaza, the response of the Arab states has been restrained.

There has been a general strike by Arabs living in the Palestinian territories and Israel, and clashes between Jewish and Arab Israelis in ethnically mixed Israeli towns like Jaffa and Lod. But the conflict seems to have aroused more intense responses in Europe than in the Arab world. Arab governments have condemned Israeli strikes in Gaza but generally done nothing.

After rejecting the 1947 UN plan for a two-state solution and after three defeats in wars against Israel, most Arab governments now extend only token political and some financial support for the Palestinian cause. Even before the Abraham Accords last year, several Gulf states had already developed unofficial ties with Israel. At present, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan formally recognise Israel. Saudi Arabia has not yet done so but has unofficial contacts with Israel. Bahrain and the UAE

could not have recognised Israel against Saudi objections.

This is a geopolitical seismic shift in the Middle East, catalysed by the recalibration of the US engagement of the Middle East to rectify ill-considered ground interventions in the region. In particular, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq was a serious mistake which left no effective check to Iran. Uncertainty about US intentions have enhanced longstanding Sunni-Arab fears about Iran that had emerged after the 1979 Iranian revolution, and shifted the primary focus of Arab concerns away from the Israel-Palestine dispute.

The Palestinian cause was always more important to Arab governments as an instrument to advance other domestic and foreign policy goals than securing a homeland for Palestinians. At the same time, the instabilities caused by the outflow of refugees after the break-up of Iraq, Libya and Syria; from a failed Lebanon under the control of Hizbollah which is an Iranian proxy; and from Turkey a Nato member, but under Mr Recep Tayyip Erdogan, playing its own game, have placed great stresses on Egypt and Jordan, and again accentuated the concerns of Gulf states, in particular, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Every geopolitical shift creates new winners and losers. The geopolitical importance of Israel which, despite its political dysfunctionality, is the most economically dynamic and stable state in the region, has been boosted. This has impelled the Gulf states to take a more pragmatic approach towards Israel. Iran has clearly been disadvantaged as Tehran now faces a de facto anti-Iran coalition backed by the US, Israel, which has been fighting a proxy war against Iran in Syria for several years, is central to this coalition which is incapable of standing up to Iran without Israel's military help.

Although the Biden administration has restarted negotiations with Iran to try and revive President Barack Obama's nuclear deal, that will not be easy given the deep distrust between the US and Iran. The Biden administration has also said it will encourage other Arab states to join the Abraham Accords. Since those accords are in effect an anti-Iran coalition, it is unclear how the Biden administration intends to reconcile these contradictory goals, if indeed it really intends to do so. Mr Biden himself has a longstanding personal commitment to Israel's security.

The week before the start of the rocket attacks on May 10, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Commander,

Major-General Hossein Salami, said in an interview that Israel was "collapsing from within" and its small size made it vulnerable to large-scale tactical operations. The unprecedented number and intensity of missile salvos that Israel was subsequently subjected to could be considered such an operation. Iran has close ties with Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad that have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of the missile attacks. Iran had long vowed revenge for various acts of sabotage and assassinations attributed to Israel.

If this was Iran's intention, then from a purely military point of view, it was a failure. Israel's missile defences are holding up well and Israel has not been deterred from retaliating. But Iran's intentions were also political: to delegitimise Israel's right to self-defence; to place the Arab governments who had joined the Abraham Accords in a difficult position; to drive wedges between those governments and their own peoples who after decades of propaganda about the Israel-Palestine dispute, are much more emotionally invested in the issue than their own governments; and to boost Teheran's own position in the Muslim world.

These political objectives appear to have had some degree of success. But whether the stresses that have emerged will lead to the break-up of the Abraham Accords and the emerging anti-Iran coalition is entirely another matter. The accords were the result of fundamental geopolitical shifts that are not so easily deflected, although the road ahead will be neither smooth nor straight. Middle Eastern roads are never smooth or straight.

WHY SHOULD SINGAPOREANS CARE?

Singapore has no direct interest in most Middle Eastern conflicts because they arise from local political factors that are remote from us. Religion is never absent from the Middle East, but religion is usually only a cover for political goals. The Palestinian issue has always been a nationalist issue, not a religious issue, and this is true of the current Gaza episode. Religion is only a tool of nationalist goals, whether the religion in question is Islam or the variant of evangelical Christianity called "Christian Zionism".

We should not forget that were it not for Israel's help to build the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) at a desperate time when no other country was willing to help us, Singapore's development could have turned out very different. Given this well-known history, Israel's capabilities enhance the SAF's deterrence, at least psychologically. I do not want to exaggerate the point, but imagine where we would have been if Israel had lost the Six-Day War or otherwise proven militarily incompetent?

We should also learn from Israel's mistakes. The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew once told an Israeli general that Singapore had learnt two things from Israel: how to be strong, and how not to use our strength – meaning that it was necessary to use strength to get along with neighbours and not live in perpetual conflict. And before we get too emotional about the current situation, we should take particular note of the societal stresses within Israel that have emerged because of this Gaza conflict.

We should also not let emotions lead us to advocate policies that erode the principle of the right to self-defence in a way that could one day rebound against ourselves. Not too many years ago, a terrorist group, no doubt inspired by Hamas, was caught plotting to launch rockets at Singapore from Batam. We were fortunate to have the cooperation of the Indonesian authorities to stop them, but politics in South-east Asia is always volatile and always unpredictable.

Sooner or later this Gaza conflict will end. When it does, what Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu, once told the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), is pertinent and should not be forgotten: "PLO people come to me all the time asking for advice on how to get rid of Israel. After all, we Vietnamese defeated both France and the United States. My answer is always the same: the French went back to France and the Americans went back to America. The Jews have nowhere to go. So you can't beat them."

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