



Residents evacuating northern Gaza by foot on Sunday. Justified anger at atrocities does not justify committing atrocities in turn, says the writer. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Hard truths about Gaza war's cruel and complex dilemmas

The harsh reality about the Palestinian issue is its long and tangled history in a region where there are rarely good options, only bad and worse ones.



Bilahari Kausikan

The horrific terrorist attack of Oct 7, which saw 1,400 mainly civilian Israelis murdered, and the consequent response against Hamas in Gaza that resulted in thousands of civilian Palestinian collateral casualties, has aroused strong emotions among Singaporeans.

To empathise is only human. Emotions are amplified by the complexity of the Palestinian issue. From that long and tangled history, narratives that lay all responsibility on one side or the other can be easily constructed to fan emotions.

But Palestine is not a morality tale of clear right or wrong. Narratives are not analyses and emotions are not interests. Rather than futilely trying to apportion responsibility, we should instead look to our interests.

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan's speech in Parliament on Nov 6 is a good starting point. It restated the principles underlying Singapore's longstanding positions on Palestine. In the current context, five points are of particular importance:

- Zero tolerance for terrorism and strong condemnation of the Oct 7 terrorist attacks by Hamas;
- Concern over civilian casualties and the humanitarian crisis and, consequently, the need for timely assistance to those in need;
- Reaffirmation of Israel's inherent right to self-defence in accordance with the United Nations Charter, humanitarian law, and the laws of war;
- Support for a two-state solution which recognises Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state as the only option for a durable solution to the conflict; and



Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, patron of the Inter-Religious Organisation, with religious leaders from all faiths at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue on Oct 4, on the occasion of Sukkot, one of the main Jewish festivals. ST PHOTO: ARIFIN JAMAR

- Not allowing the issue to divide Singaporeans.

The last point is clearly the most important to Singapore.

Only days before the terrorist attack on Israel, on Oct 4, I attended a Sukkot celebration – one of the main Jewish festivals – at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue in Waterloo Street, the oldest existing synagogue in Singapore dating from 1878. Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, patron of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), was guest of honour.

The celebration was attended not just by the Rabbi, but also by the Mufti of Singapore and religious leaders of all faiths – Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Sikh, Christians of different denominations, Zoroastrians and Bahai – from the IRO.

This was unique. Such an event would not – could not – have been held anywhere else in South-east Asia. I doubt that anything like it was likely to be held anywhere else in the world. This is what makes Singapore, Singapore. Whatever our individual opinions about Oct 7 and its aftermath, this is something precious to be preserved at all costs. Singaporeans of all faiths should

rally around the five principles I have summarised.

But defence of our uniqueness from the raw emotions evoked by the war in Gaza also requires a deeper understanding than can be conveyed by any ministerial speech.

Principles are necessarily simplifications of far more complex, and at times harsh, realities. No government, out of diplomatic prudence if nothing else, can publicly say everything that needs to be said about balancing conflicting considerations and the complicated processes in which principles must be contextualised in order to become policy.

Singaporeans should not dismiss the depth of the trauma inflicted by the barbarism of the Oct 7 attack: not just murder, but also rape, torture, mutilation, including of infants, in some instances captured on videos by cameras of killed terrorists. This cannot be justified by any reason.

Documents captured from dead terrorists make clear that their orders were to kill as many people as possible and not any military objective. Israel is a small country and few Israelis would be at more than one degree of separation from those murdered or taken hostage.

Justified anger at atrocities does not, of course, justify committing atrocities in turn. The ministerial speech cautioned that “it is crucial that decisions are not made out of anger, blind wrath and hatred”. That is obvious and I don't think the Israeli government will do so even if some Israeli political figures speak wildly and thoughtlessly. But it is equally crucial that Singaporeans understand Israel's war aims.

WHY DETERRENCE MATTERS

This is certainly not a war of revenge. To say that Israel is exercising its inherent right to self-defence, while true and important, begs the really crucial question: To what specific end is Israel exercising that right?

The answer is to restore deterrence. The importance of this cannot be overemphasised. On Oct 7, Israeli deterrence against Hamas clearly failed. Israel must restore deterrence against Hamas and whatever may replace it in Gaza after its current leadership is destroyed. More vitally, Israel must restore deterrence against Iran and Hezbollah and other terrorist groups that Teheran supports. Restoring deterrence is an existential issue for Israel.

Deterrence based on military superiority is one of the pillars on which Israel's right to exist has rested from its very founding.

In 1947, United Nations Resolution 181 proposed a two-state solution for Palestine. After some hesitation, the Jews then living under the British mandate in Palestine accepted the UN plan, while the Arabs did not. On May 14, 1948, Israel declared independence. The very next day, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon attacked Israel, with Saudi Arabia and Yemen sending troops under Egyptian command. Jordan subsequently joined the war.

Israel survived the 1948 war. But it took two more lost wars against Israel in 1967 and 1973 before the Arab states faced reality and recognised de facto, if not immediately de jure, Israel's right to exist.

Egypt recognised Israel in 1979; Jordan followed in 1994. In 2020, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan recognised Israel under the Abraham Accords.

Over the last decade or longer, most Gulf states have established some degree of informal contact and cooperation with Israel. This includes Saudi Arabia, which has been negotiating with the United States to normalise relations with Israel in return for security guarantees and help with its civilian nuclear programme. Syria and Lebanon are technically still at war with Israel. But Syria is a failed state not in full control of its own territory; and in 2022, Lebanon signed a maritime boundary agreement over the Mediterranean gas fields with Israel.

By contrast, the destruction of Israel is written into Hamas' founding documents. About a fortnight after the Oct 7 attack, senior Hamas leader Ghazi Hamad vowed that Hamas would repeat attacks “again and again” to “remove” Israel. Asked if that meant the annihilation of Israel, he replied with chilling simplicity: “Yes, of course.”

Iranian leaders often make similar statements. There is little reason not to take them at their word.

Under these circumstances and with the restoration of deterrence as an existential issue, humanitarian law and the laws of war take on a somewhat abstract quality as counsels of perfection. Nevertheless, I think Israel, in order to retain the support of the US and key European countries, will respect humanitarian law and the laws of war to the extent that it is practical.

That last phrase – to the extent practical – is key. I do not think Israel deliberately targets civilians as civilians. But Hamas wears no uniforms and routinely deploys and operates its military assets in, under and near civilian infrastructure. To Hamas, civilian casualties are only another weapon to delegitimise Israel's right to self-defence.

Israel faces a wicked dilemma (I use “wicked” in the sense of a problem that is impossible to solve because of its complexity). Acting too gingerly risks allowing deterrence to further erode. This is absolutely unacceptable. Its previous policy of containing Hamas within Gaza having failed, Israel has announced its intention to eradicate the Hamas leadership to deter whatever will take its place from similar terrorist acts. But doing so will and has resulted in large-scale collateral civilian deaths.

TERRORIST THREAT

Civilian deaths are always to be deplored. But it is in nobody's interest if terrorists anywhere are encouraged by the Hamas attack on Israel and come to believe that they can avoid retribution by adopting similar tactics.

The ministerial speech made clear that Singapore's strong stance against terrorism was not just out of sympathy for victims in other countries, but because “terrorism is a clear and present threat for Singapore too”.

In 2016, only two years after Israel launched Operation Protective Edge against Hamas to stop rocket attacks from Gaza, a plot by a terrorist group to fire rockets at Marina Bay Sands in Singapore from Batam was foiled with the help of the Indonesian authorities.

Hamas has a significant presence in Malaysia. Malaysian

leaders have met Hamas leaders. Although it denies it, the Palestinian Cultural Organisation Malaysia has often been described as a representative office for Hamas. After Oct 7, there were demonstrations in support of Hamas and to celebrate its so-called “victory”. A Malaysian school even encouraged children to brandish toy guns to celebrate solidarity with Palestine.

Fortunately, even Singaporeans who feel strongly about Palestine have not gone as far as celebrating violence and I hope they never will. Still, in the past three years, two Singaporeans have been dealt with under the Internal Security Act for wanting to travel to Gaza to fight alongside Hamas.

As a thought experiment, imagine how we should respond if, some time in the future, terrorists operating from urban areas in Johor fire rockets at Housing Board flats in northern Singapore or try to shoot down aircraft taking off and landing at Changi Airport? Given the direction in which Malaysian politics is drifting, can we always rely on the Malaysian authorities to stop them?

TWO-STATE SOLUTION

In the long run, Israel's security must, as the ministerial speech made clear, rest on a comprehensive political settlement based on a two-state solution. This is obviously true. The problem is that there is no obvious viable pathway to such a solution.

UN Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) mentioned in the ministerial speech refer directly or indirectly to a just and lasting peace being based on Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories. But both resolutions are silent on how this is to be achieved.

The Middle East is a region where there are seldom any good options; only bad options and worse options. The Palestinian issue is where the dilemmas are sharpest.

The cruel paradox facing Israel and the Palestinians is that any political settlement must rest on a foundation of stability; stability rests on strong deterrence; but after Oct 7, what Israel needs to do to restore stability through deterrence will make any pathway to a settlement even more difficult, at least for the foreseeable future.

It is not to be taken for granted that the Israeli hard right, Fatah on the West Bank, and Hamas in Gaza really want a two-state solution. Some level of conflict suits them best. All remain in power by manipulating the Palestinian issue in a tacit conspiracy in which ordinary Palestinians pay the cost.

Is Fatah in deep mourning because the Hamas leadership is being targeted by Israel? In 2007, Hamas seized Gaza in a coup in which many Fatah officials were brutally murdered.

Whether Fatah or Hamas, full sovereignty means full responsibility. A few years ago, I visited the West Bank to meet a Palestinian friend who had been a senior member of the Palestinian Authority (PA) but had just resigned. Why, I asked? We have failed in both the struggle and in governance, he replied.

With full sovereignty, Palestine will cease to be an international cause celebre and become just another corrupt and badly governed Third World state. Without the excuse of Israeli pressure, international sympathy and aid will soon dry up.

Even if Fatah replaces Hamas in Gaza after the war, this hard reality will not change. Fatah will have to quickly learn to govern honestly and competently. I do not say that this is impossible, but it certainly goes against the grain of Fatah's dismal record on the West Bank since the PA was established in 1994.

I doubt the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-right government will survive Oct 7. But even if it is replaced by a more centrist government, we should not assume Israeli support for a two-state solution. I have been struck by how Oct 7 has tilted political attitudes among my Israeli friends, particularly those who had been left-inclined and supportive of a two-state solution.

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Geopolitical context of Palestinian issue

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We can only hope that this is not a permanent condition.

PALESTINIAN PAWN IN REGIONAL POLITICS

Finally, Singaporeans should understand the broader geopolitical context of the Palestinian issue. The 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the destruction of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime were a strategic blunder that destroyed the only regional balance to Iran. This created a fundamental geopolitical instability in the heart of the Middle East. Ever since, dealing with this imbalance and not Palestine has been the primary strategic concern of most Sunni Arab governments, particularly the Gulf monarchies, with the partial exceptions of Qatar and Oman.

After three failed wars against Israel, and with Egypt and Jordan recognising Israel, enthusiasm for the Palestinian cause among most Arab governments had, in any case, waned as they increasingly looked to their own national interests. The 2011 Arab Spring protests turned the attention of the Gulf monarchies even further inwards towards the far more crucial issue of regime survival. The 2020 Abraham Accords marked the formal marginalisation of the Palestinian issue.

For Iran, Palestine is mainly a means to pressure Israel and embarrass Sunni Arab governments.

The Palestinians know all this. The Oct 7 terrorist attack and earlier smaller-scale attacks on Israel were attempts by Hamas and similar groups to check this process of marginalisation. The Oct 7 attack – triggered by faster-than-expected progress in the talks on Saudi normalisation of ties with Israel – did succeed in putting the Palestinian cause back in centre stage – for now. Its effect is likely to be only temporary.

The Abraham Accords are, in effect, a US-sponsored anti-Iran coalition in which Israel provides military heft and the US overall deterrence against Iran as an offshore balancer, seen most recently in the deployment of two US aircraft carriers and a nuclear submarine to the region. Since the geopolitical conditions that led to the Abraham Accords have not changed, sooner or later, the process of Saudi-Israeli normalisation will resume, delayed but not diverted by Oct 7.

Hamas is an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which is anathema to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and most Gulf monarchies and the Egyptian military. I doubt anyone in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi or Cairo is losing much sleep over the eradication of the Hamas leadership. No country has left the Abraham Accords over Gaza. The civilian casualties are mainly a domestic political problem that these governments must manage and their statements and positions in the UN should be seen in this light.

At the time of writing – Nov 8, 2023 – it does not seem likely that the current conflict in Gaza will escalate into a wider regional war. Exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and Israel on the northern front have caused relatively few casualties on both sides and Hezbollah seems more interested in showing solidarity with Hamas than providing real support. Iran has enough internal troubles to want to add to them by provoking a major war in which it cannot remain uninvolved. I am convinced that sooner or later, there will be a major war in the Middle East. But that big war will be fought over Iran's nuclear capability and not Palestine, which is simply not important enough to any of the major players.

• Bilahari Kausikan is a retired senior Singapore diplomat.