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The Latest Gaza War and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

By Rohan Gunaratna

SYNOPSIS

Following the surprise launch of Hamas' multi-prong offensive to battle Israel on 7 October, the decades-long conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinian people has moved a step closer to a full-scale war drawing in other countries in the Middle East. The need to find a lasting solution to the simmering conflict has become more urgent than ever.

COMMENTARY

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a significant impact on international security and has played a major role in the rise of global terrorism since the 1960s. The world is again reminded of this by Hamas' surprise attack on Israel on 7 October. Hamas is the Palestinian spin-off of the Muslim Brotherhood which is considered a threat to several governments in the Middle East.

Militants from Hamas attacked multiple targets in Israel by breaching the security fence separating the Palestinian enclave of Gaza from the Jewish state. They killed civilians and took many hostages. The surprise offensive and its tactics clearly reaffirmed Hamas as a terrorist organisation, as designated by the United States of America (US), the United Kingdom, member states of the European Union, and other countries in different regions of the world. This practically means Hamas can no longer be a legitimate participant in any negotiations that aim to achieve a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Understanding the Threat

Timed to take place one day after the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, the unprecedented scale of Hamas' incursion into Israel elevated it beyond a terrorist

attack and marked it as an act of war. For Israel, the failure of intelligence to anticipate the attack, the large number of casualties suffered to date, and the terror wrought on society, rendered the attack as Israel's equivalent of the 9/11 attacks on the US twenty-two years ago. The violence wreaked by Hamas, including the kidnapping of hostages and threats to kill or to use them as human shields, highlighted the severity of the threat.

The endless cycle of destruction and grief experienced by the Palestinians since the creation of Israel in 1948 has led them to support Hamas. However, after the events of 7 October, Israeli perspectives towards them, as well as the Arab and Muslim world, will harden. This will make it more challenging to negotiate a permanent solution to the conflict, and Hamas is unlikely to be welcomed as a part of any future Palestinian state.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War, also known as the Ramadan War, ended with a remarkable victory for Israel. From current indications, this time, neither Israel nor Hamas will emerge as a clear winner.

Global Implications

This war between Israel and Hamas is a transnational one, with the latter receiving funds, weapons and other forms of support from overseas. Israel's response to Hamas' attack has already had regional implications, with the Israeli Air Force having struck Damascus International Airport and Aleppo in Syria. In the anticipated ground counter-offensive, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) is likely to extend its operations into southern Lebanon and Syria.

Several important questions arise. First, if this were to escalate into a regional war, who would be the parties involved? It is important to note that this is not 1973, and despite appearances that states are aligning against Israel, the support from the region's Sunni states against the Jewish state is limited mainly to the streets than the corridors of power.

Jordan and Egypt are the most pivotal states, and both depend heavily on Western, particularly US, economic assistance. Despite the region's pivot towards East Asia and Egypt's flirtation with Russia, the US remains the largest provider of development and security assistance to the region. Washington continues to hold leverage over Amman and Cairo.

The second question is about the actual level of support for Hamas in Arab capitals. It is important not to underestimate the antipathy towards Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan. Neither of these countries want to see an empowered Hamas, especially an Iran-aligned pseudo-state in any part of Palestine. As for Lebanon, its military has limited capacity and would likely not participate in a war with Israel.

The Gulf states are divided and in a difficult position. Qatar and Kuwait openly support the Muslim Brotherhood, while the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia have taken a different stance. The UAE has attributed blame to Hamas, and Saudi Arabia faces the challenge of maintaining its previous policy on Islamists

without losing prestige in the eyes of the Muslim population not only in the Middle East but elsewhere in the world.

While an inter-state war seems unlikely at this stage, the fate of peace agreements is uncertain. If Israel were to launch a ground invasion of Gaza with the aim of destroying Hamas and reoccupying the area, it would be extremely difficult for Arab states that recognise Israel to manage public opinion, both nationally and within the Muslim and Arab worlds.

Likely Developments

There are many short-term scenarios that could emerge from the current explosive escalation. The likelihood and outcome of these scenarios depend on Israel's strategic goals and variables such as hostage negotiations, the willingness of Arab states, particularly Egypt, to provide material and logistical support to Hamas, and the possibility of an Israeli strike on Iran.

If the Arab states close ranks against Hamas and a "grand bargain" is reached involving Iran, possibly resulting in a weakened Hamas, we might avert a worst-case scenario. It is clear that the Gulf states do not want any conflict with Iran and would certainly not support an Israeli or US strike on Iran.

This emerging regional conflict in the Levant, as did the conflicts in Afghanistan (1979), Iraq (2003), and Syria (2014), will have an impact on the security of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. While responding to the cross-border flows of foreign fighters, the international community must make comprehensive efforts to facilitate a two-state solution, allowing both Palestinians and Israelis to live in peace.

Beyond Hamas

Debates over responsibility for the current crisis will persist. There will be clashing narratives and the many digital platforms on the Internet and social media will severely distort what is needed to make peace. On one side, the argument is that Hamas has the indisputable right to resist the Israeli occupation violently, regardless of the cost. On the other side, the view is that Hamas is barbaric and willing to resort to extremist methods including killing of its own people and others, which made it necessary to completely destroy the terrorist organisation and its campaign of terror.

Anyone who supports peace and a meaningful two-state solution in Palestine should be horrified by the ongoing state of war. A renewed effort must be exerted to put the peace process back on track while quickly alleviating the suffering of the people in Gaza.

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