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Singapore's Principled and Balanced Approach to the Israel-Palestine Conflict

By Mohamed Nassir

SYNOPSIS

Singapore's resilience is being tested once again, this time by the current Israel-Hamas war. Internally, the war has the potential to create fissures between the communities, while externally, over-zealous politicians in Muslim-majority countries around Singapore denounce it for its purported support of Israel. Singapore's response to the current Israel-Hamas war however, as has always been the case, is based on a principled and balanced approach.

COMMENTARY

With the Israelis and Hamas currently locked in a bitter war, Singapore's principled and balanced approach to its relations with both Israel and Palestine bears repeating. Although Singapore has had close diplomatic ties with Israel since independence in 1965, it has always voted in support of the "two-state solution of Israel and Palestine" in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions.

At the Emergency Special Session of UNGA on 27 October 2023, while making clear its condemnation of the acts of terrorism by Hamas on 7 October and Israel's right of self-defence, Singapore voted in support of humanitarian assistance to the civilians in Gaza, rejection of the evacuation and forced transfer of Palestinians, and reiterated the urgency for a negotiated two-state solution.

This is consistent with Singapore's stance at the UN where it has, for more than 50 years, upheld the application of the UN Charter and international law, prioritised humanitarian assistance during conflicts, and promoted dialogue – a testament to Singapore's pragmatic and moral approach to foreign policy.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict a Test of Singapore's Resilience

Over the years, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has frequently tested Singapore's resilience, both internationally and domestically. Situated among Muslim-majority countries in the region, Singapore's friendly relations with Israel is sometimes viewed with displeasure by the people in these countries whose governments, moreover, do not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Tensions arising from the current Israel-Hamas war have already led over-zealous politicians in these countries to denounce Singapore for its purported support of Israel.

The current Israel-Hamas war also risks opening up fissures in Singapore society along religious lines. In October 2023, the Singapore Police received eight reports of offensive remarks targeted at members of the Jewish or Muslim communities. Elsewhere in the West, there has been a surge in reports of antisemitism, Islamophobia and hate crimes. Extremist and terrorist groups in our region can be expected to grasp opportunities to enrage the sentiments of Muslims here and in the region for their own ends. Singapore must therefore increase its vigilance and preparedness to ensure the continuing security of its people.

Singapore's Longstanding Support for Palestine

Many people in the region believe that Singapore supports Israel unreservedly and are oblivious to Singapore's longstanding support for the Palestinians. In fact, Singapore has contributed humanitarian aid and capacity-building grants to the Palestinian Authority.

Since 2013, over 600 Palestinian officials have attended courses and training programmes in Singapore. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore provided more than US\$550,000 worth of special healthcare assistance, including PCR test kits, along with customised training programmes for Palestinian healthcare professionals.

In 2022, Singapore established its embassy in Tel Aviv. Singapore also opened a representative office in Ramallah, Palestine, to support the work of the country's non-resident Representative to the Palestinian Authority, Ambassador Hawazi Daipi. Such diplomatic actions demonstrate Singapore's commitment to a principled and balanced foreign policy.

Managing Sentiments and Building Community Resilience

Recently, Singapore's Law and Home Affairs Minister, K. Shanmugam, met with 200 local Malay-Muslim leaders and personalities in a closed-door session to explain Singapore's foreign policy decisions and its position on the Israel-Hamas conflict. Efforts like this help to demonstrate the government's empathy and to keep the population informed and engaged.

During that session, besides explaining the most recent UN resolution on the war, Minister Shanmugam highlighted details of Singapore's peace advocacy in the UN, including Singapore's recurring vote against illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the designation of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Minister Shanmugam also urged the Malay-Muslim leaders to reach out to the community and to organise discussions to explain Singapore's objective of preserving the precious fabric of the country's multi-racial and multi-religious society by not importing foreign arguments and debates. It is notable that the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) plans to issue an advisory to help the community process the deluge of information related to the ongoing war.

The contesting views permeating social media, along with graphic images of the killing of innocents in Gaza and Israel, can polarise Singapore society and bring about broader tensions. There is an overriding concern that Singaporeans may be motivated to join radical groups, and to go as far as to take extreme and harmful actions of their own. In the last two years, the Singapore authorities have detained three radicalised young individuals – two who were enraged by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and had planned to join Hamas, and one who had planned to emulate the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand.

There is an immediate need to provide platforms for Singaporeans of all races and religions to channel their thoughts, empathy and energy constructively. Since the outbreak of the war on 7 October 2023, some organisations have taken the initiative to provide humanitarian assistance to the victims of the war, especially in Gaza.

On 29 October 2023, Humanity Matters, a local interfaith organisation, organised an interreligious gathering to pack relief supplies for the people of Gaza. A week before that, the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) held an assembly with about 100 people from various religious communities to observe a collective prayer, with Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam in attendance.

Prayer vigils have also been organised in mosques and other locations across Singapore for Muslims to pray for the victims of the war in Palestine. These serve both as an expression of spiritual solidarity with the people of Gaza and Palestine, and their unity in the quest for peace in the Middle East.

Also significant is the generous financial support from people of all faiths and walks of life in Singapore. For example, the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation (RLAF), in collaboration with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), raised more than US\$3.3 million in just two weeks, the biggest collection in its history.

Singapore: Strengthening Coexistence in Multi-Religious Plural Societies

The different communities in Singapore must try to mitigate the sentiments of frustration or helplessness arising from the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Activists and concerned individuals must work closely with the government to preserve Singapore's precious inter-religious and plural society.

Singapore's multi-religious plural society can be a source of hope in this diverse world. Its inter-cultural tolerance and understanding is already well-known internationally. Several references have been made to Singapore in relation to the Israel-Palestine issue.

As early as 1988, a *New York Times* opinion piece mentioned that “a democratic Gaza has the potential to turn into a Singapore of the Middle East”. Recently, on 9 October 2023, *Newsweek* ran an opinion headlined, “Gaza Could Have Been Singapore”. Even the late Yasser Arafat, former President of the Palestinian National Authority, had expressed his intention for Palestine to be “Singapore of the Middle East”.

It is hoped that Singapore can someday play a role in facilitating dialogue between disputing countries, demonstrating the potential that a peaceful, religiously diverse society can have in this respect. The leaders and people of Israel and Palestine must be inspired and motivated to re-establish efforts not just for a two-state solution, but the goal of peaceful coexistence and understanding as well.

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