

ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR 2021: CAN A DEVIDED WORLD RESOLVE THE PALESTINIAN DISPUTE?

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ABSTRACT

The present paper comes in the wake of the deadly May 2021 Israel-Hamas war. Widespread destruction of lives and property marked the bloody 11-day conflict, which was the most gruesome after the Israel-Hamas conflict of 2014. While briefly exploring the roots of the Israel-Palestine imbroglio and the peace process, the paper focuses its attention on the current war between the two and finds deep divisions and trust-deficit galore within the global community and in the Arab world over their reactions and relations with Israel. Though the Arab world roundly condemned the 'Israeli aggression', it was mostly notional as there were no diplomatic rumblings or snapping of ties with Israel. Scathing observations and punitive resolutions were passed in the OIC meeting, the lead organization of the Islamic countries, but without any follow-up action. The detestation for Hamas, a designated terrorist organization, was vivid and failed to generate a united global response against the perceived 'Israeli aggression'. The paper highlights India's attitude towards war and points out the vital stakes involved for the country in the resolution of the West Asian crisis. While calling for upholding cease-fire and promoting de-escalation, India has maintained its traditional stand for a 'two-State solution', but with a difference. The strategic change in India's official stand was consequent to the advent of the Modi government in 2014 and the upswing in India's relations with Israel and the entire Arab world. The paper concludes with findings that fragmented global and Arab politics is at the root of the non-resolution of the Palestine issue. It ends with a note that India and the world will continue to strive to find a peaceful and amicable solution to the Israel-Palestine problem, in line with the 'two-State Solution', which Israel however rejects at the moment.

KEYWORDS: Israel, Palestine, Hamas, Arab, War, Ceasefire, De-escalation, Peace, Process, UN, USA, OIC, India

Deadly war once again broke out between Israel and Hamas in May 2021. Unabated violence rocked Israel and Gaza. The orgy of death and destruction perpetrated from both sides, with bombs, missiles, and rockets raining over each other incessantly for 11-long days resulted in hundreds of deaths and widespread destruction on both sides. Though the roots of violence are embedded in the long struggle of the Palestinians for an independent State of Palestine, the instant provocation in the present case ostensibly came from a judgment of an Israeli lower court calling for the eviction of Palestinians of East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood to make way for the Israeli settlements. However, the Supreme Court, on the request of the Attorney General, put on hold the hearing slated for May 9, which also marked the "Jerusalem Day", celebrated by the Israelis, commemorating the victory of Israel in the 6-day Arab Israeli War of 1967, the re-unification of Jerusalem (East and West Jerusalem) and Israel's regaining the control of Old City from Jordan following the war. Tension had been brewing since the beginning of the Ramadan in mid-April over Israeli police putting restrictions on the 'Iftar' evening gatherings of Palestinians at the walled Old City's Damascus Gate in East Jerusalem.

Palestine is not a sovereign independent state and hence doesn't exercise full and independent control over its territories of West Bank and Gaza. However, by the 1998 proclamation, the State of Palestine was recognized by 138/193 UN member-states and two non-member states. In November 2021, a General Assembly resolution upgraded Palestine to a "non-member observer state" status in the United Nations.

As a quick recap, Palestine, which was ruled by the Ottoman Syria Empire until 1917, came under the occupation of the British Army in 1917 following the victory of the Allied forces in World War I, defeating the Ottoman ruler. Consequently, Britain was granted a mandate for Palestine in April 1920 at the San Francisco Conference, which was approved by the League of Nations in July 1922. Significantly, the League's mandate contained provisions for establishing a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. This provision came into effect in 1923. In a way, this was the realization of the British Government's Balfour Declaration of 1917 during the First World War, which publicly gave the call for the establishment of a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine. This sowed the seeds of discord between the Palestinians and the Jews. The decades from the 1920s to

1940s witnessed a steady flow of Jews coming and settling in Palestine. In addition, Hitler's genocide brought thousands of fleeing Jews to this area.

At the end of the British Mandate in 1948, the United Nations approved a resolution calling for the partition of the British-ruled Palestine Mandate into separate Jewish and Arab states, with a Special International Regime for the city of Jerusalem. The plan, accepted by the Jewish leaders and rejected by the Arab side, however, never took off the ground. Upon the termination of the mandate on 14 May 1948, the British left Palestine, leaving incomplete the resolution of the Palestine issue. David Ben Gurion, the Chairman, of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the State of Israel on the intervening night of May 14, 1948, establishing the first Jewish State in 2000 years. This was fiercely opposed by its neighbouring Arab states, namely Egypt, Transjordan, Iraq, and Syria who invaded and attacked the newly established State of Israel. By the time the first Arab-Israeli war ended in March 1949, the following year Israel controlled most of the territory, while Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt Gaza. Though skirmishes continued between the Palestinians and Israelis, the next major war was fought between the two in 1967, popularly called the "6-day war", in which Israel defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan; and captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula.

To break the logjam and resolve the contentious Palestine issue, several efforts have been made over the years, such as the Oslo Accords of 1993, Camp David Summit, 2000; President Clinton's peace measures; Taiba Summit, 2001; the European Union's peace reforms; and the Abraham Accords of September 2020. However, all these peace initiatives were met with failures, largely due to the intransigent attitude of both Palestine and Israel, the mutual lack of trust between them, and the lopsided character of peace efforts. East Jerusalem and the determination of the Palestinian borders have always been among the most vexed issues, and they remain so. Additionally, the politics of big powers have also negated the possibility of a long-lasting and viable two-State solution, acceptable to both Israel and Palestine. No wonder, all proposals met with rejection, sometimes by Palestine and at other times, by Israel.

THE WAR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The 11-day deadly violence not only set the clock back by several years but also brought out a sharply divided world, with divisions visible within the Arab world, the non-Muslim world, the United Nations, and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). With divisions galore at all levels, questions are being raised whether there can be a durable peace between Israel and Hamas? Can a two-State solution be

realized? Can future wars between the two be stopped from occurring?

The grim data available on war destruction testifies that around 250 Palestinian civilians, including women and children, were killed and thousands wounded and crippled. The elimination of hundreds of Hamas's fighters, including the top 25 handlers was an additional setback for Gaza's ruling Hamas government. The 11-day relentless bombing of Gaza by Israel flattened a large part of the city, high rise buildings, including 769 housing and commercial units, besides leaving thousands of people homeless and displaced, who have been forced to take shelter in the UN-run schools. Power stations, electric supply lines, and desalination plants were extensively hit by the bombing, severely crippling hospitals, and their services. Power availability went down from the pre-violence period of 12 hours to 4-5 hours post-war. According to the United Nations, approximately 8000,000 people in Gaza do not have regular access to clean piped water, as nearly 50 percent of the water network was damaged in the Israeli attack.¹ It is pertinent to observe here that the 2021 Israel and Hamas war was less devastating as compared to the previous wars of 2008 and 2014 when Israeli troops entered Gaza. While in 2008, around 1391 Palestinians were killed; including a large number of women and children, around 2310 Palestinians lost their lives in the 7 weeks war of 2014. In contrast, the Israeli casualties were much lesser.

In consistently opposing Israel's actions against Jerusalem, together with launching deadly attacks on Israel, not presumably expected by Israel itself, Hamas has earned the support, sympathy, and goodwill of countries like Turkey and Iran and has thus forced the Israel-friendly Arab countries to come out with denunciations for Israel. To that extent, pressure has been built-up on the Arab countries for the Palestinian cause, notwithstanding Hamas being viewed with suspicion and negation by several Arab countries.

The violence, further, allowed Hamas to showcase its firepower against Israel and to prove that Palestine President Mahmud Abbas is incapable of forcefully taking up the Palestinian cause with Israel. While an ageing President Abbas faces anti-establishment sentiments, Hamas sees an opportunity in the violence for itself to establish its government in West Bank, in addition to its current hold in Gaza. Though Hamas suffered major damages in the current war, it massively gained in popularity, thereby boosting its future electoral chances. Hamas is expected to gain rich political dividends in the now-suspended future elections to the Palestinian legislature and the Presidency (The Washing Post, April 30, 2021)

The latest round of conflagration between Israel and Hamas has once again established the reality of a divided world, notwithstanding the great emphasis laid on peace since

the last 75 years of the Palestine issue. To be sure, it has exposed the deep chinks and intense mistrust between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Despite years of negotiations, mediation, and confidence-building measures by global powers, hostilities are still simmering between the belligerent nations. After 2014, this was the deadliest war between Israel and Hamas, baying for each other's blood and bent upon erasing each other's existence from the map of the world!

With this war, the process of normalization of relations between Israel and its estranged Arab neighbours has suffered a setback. The Donald Trump-brokered Abraham Accords of September 2020, which set in motion the advent of peace in the volatile West Asian theatre, has taken a beat as the Arab world condemned the Israeli aggression and called for punitive action against Israel by the world community.

CEASEFIRE AND VICTORY CLAIMS BY HAMAS AND ISRAEL

The ceasefire declared between the warring sides following an intense diplomatic effort was proclaimed as a victory by each party over the other. In particular, the so-called victory celebrations indulged in by Hamas reflected, more than anything else, its deep aversion and intolerance for Israel. Though the ceasefire continues, it remains too fragile as both Hamas and Israel see their respective victories in the ceasefire. Their attitude has given rise to two pertinent questions: One, does the ceasefire mark a victory for one and a defeat for the other, as being claimed by both but principally by Hamas? Two, how long the ceasefire would hold on? Following the 11-day bloody conflict between Israel and Hamas, the bloodiest since 2014 violence, the ceasefire declaration saw Hamas break into jubilation and proclaiming its victory over Israel. It congratulated its fighters and its war division Al Qasam Brigade and other smaller militant groups such as Islamic Jihad and termed the ceasefire as a "humiliating defeat" for Israel and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in particular, asserting "...We have the right to rejoice despite the pain, wounds, destroyed homes and martyrs."(The Washington Post, May 21, 2021)

While confirming the ceasefire, Hamas released an official statement declaring victory. It said: "We were able, with the help of God, to humiliate the enemy and its army, whose leadership boasted of killing children and destroying residential towers". Its representative, Abu Obeida said: "We fought in the resistance, the battle of the Sword of Jerusalem, in defence of Jerusalem with all honour, will, and pride, on behalf of an entire nation." Notwithstanding Hamas's victory claims, Jerusalem remains under Israel's occupation and sovereignty. The victory proclamation and celebrations by Hamas would have been meaningful if Jerusalem had fallen and come under the Palestinian government, which is the main objective of the Palestinian movement. Secondly, it is to

be remembered that a ceasefire was brokered following massive and non-stop live media and television coverage of Palestinian destruction by the Israeli warplanes, resulting in large-scale human casualties in Gaza. The eyes of the entire world got fixated over Palestine's mauling by the Israeli aggression, prompting international powers to mediate to stop the further devastation of Gaza and victimization of people. As such, the cessation of hostilities cannot be interpreted as a victory for Hamas. The victory trumpets can, at best, be seen as moral boosting of its cadres and fighters.

Joining hands with Hamas were the Jordanians, who euphorically celebrated with gunfire the "victory of the resistance" against Israel. Thousands of demonstrators carried banners reading: "Jerusalem is the symbol of victory", congratulations on the victory of the resistance", "the resilience of Gaza led to victory", "Death to Israel" and "Let's trade the olive branch for the gun".

Similar to the claims of Hamas, Israel too claimed victory. Prime Minister Netanyahu hailed Israel's bombardment of Palestinian armed groups in Gaza as an "exceptional success", saying "we have achieved our goals in the operation". Defending the Israeli aggression against the Islamic militant government and jihadi groups of Gaza, he asserted "the public doesn't know everything" about Israel's gains in the operation "and neither does Hamas."(Ibid)

While many in Israel were rooting for the toppling of the Hamas government, observers hold that the "lack of a decisive winner doesn't amount to a loss, since Israel's strategy is to wage a long-term campaign of deterrence." The so-called victory for Israel is being viewed by many as the return of its long-term policy of "mowing the grass", implying periodic Israeli military operations against the Palestinian militants in Gaza to weaken their military capabilities, if not destroy the militant organizations. (Ibid)

Despite these laboured arguments and justifications, the assertion of an Israeli victory seems meaningless and invalid. Contrary to popular perceptions in Israel, Hamas proved its strength and launched unabated rocket attacks, lobbing around more than 4000 projectiles into Israel, many of which were successful in crossing the border and managed to reach as far as Tel Aviv. Though Israel managed to destroy around 90 percent of rockets mid-air, the fact it could not stop the unabated barrage of rockets till the very last proves the military capability and grit of Hamas remain unconquered.

Even after the establishment of a truce, tensions persist between Israel and Hamas. Exuding confidence, Ezzat El-Reshiq, a member of the Hamas political bureau, told the news agency, "It is true the battle ends today but (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu and the whole world should know that our hands are on the trigger and we will

continue to grow the capabilities of this resistance.” Just 24 hours into the ceasefire, tensions broke out as Israeli police stormed the Al Aqsa mosque after the Friday prayers. Citizens reported about the loud buzzing of Israeli Drones in the Gaza sky. (Tom O’Connor, May 20, 2021)

The fragility of the ceasefire could be gauged by none other than the Palestine Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki, who told Al Jazeera “there are no guarantees. No guarantees at all that the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas would hold. Because, Israel, proclaims that the ceasefire is unilateral. That they have taken that decision on their own....” (ANI News, May 22, 2021)

Before going into the ceasefire, both Israel and Hamas issued a note of caution. While Israel said: “The reality on the ground will determine the continuation of the campaign”, Hamas retorted the success of (of the ceasefire) “depends on how much Israel is ready to respect the Palestinians’ rights.” Reports speak of grave provocations by Hamas, with the latest being Yahya Sinwar, a top Hamas militant leader, posing a photograph with a son of a dead militant of the Al-Qasam Brigade. In the photo, the child is seen in camouflage clothing and holding an AKS-74U assault rifle in his hands and is carried by Sinwar during a demonstration in Gaza city. The Israeli army posted the video on Twitter, saying “Does it look like an organization that wants peace?” Hamas leadership also took out a military parade in the Gaza city, showcasing its stock of rocket arsenals and missiles, and fighters dressed in full fighting gears and seated atop tanks, with a rapturous public cheering the militants.

GLOBAL REACTIONS IN DIVIDED WORLD

As usual, the response of the world over the present Palestinian conflict is divided with countries displaying their traditional biases toward their preferred allies along the expected lines. But while the division between the West and the East is marked, the sting was missing from many of the Arab countries in their responses. Reactions ranged from extreme to moderate in the Arab world, sending out a mixed message that while they denounce the Israeli actions, the political and diplomatic relations with Israel will remain unaffected and that did happen as there were ruptures in the diplomatic relations of the Arab countries with Israel.

Displaying a moderate response, Saudi Arabia, which has not yet normalized its relations with Israel but has tacitly approved the growing proximity of its Gulf allies with Israel, said, “...it rejected Israel’s strategy of evicting dozens of Palestinians from their homes” (in the Jarrah neighbourhood in East Jerusalem). Slightly raising the pitch was the Emirates and Bahrain who condemned the Israeli raids on the Al Aqsa Plaza housing the sacred Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Expressing concerns, Abu

Dhabi asked Israel to “take responsibility for a de-escalation” of violence. On its part, Morocco asserted that it was viewing the developments with “deep concern” and that their King Mohammed regarded “these violations inadmissible and fuelling tensions”

Likewise, Egypt and Jordan, which have diplomatic relations with Israel, have been relentlessly pursuing a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Though condemning Israeli operations, Egypt considers Hamas as an outlawed branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and a danger to the region. The United States designated Hamas as a “Foreign Terrorist Organisation” and outlawed it in October 1997. Hence for many, little sympathies are attached with Hamas. Not surprisingly, the government-controlled media in the UAE and Bahrain did not cover the violent flare-up non-stop like the other media channels in the region.

Notwithstanding their moderate response countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar enjoying friendly ties with the United States and having improved relations with Israel are simultaneously feeling the heat of the Israeli aggression more than any other else. Iran, Israel’s *bête noire*, and Turkey, both, who deadly opposed Israel’s aggression, have turned the tables on their Arab rivals.

Iran, in sharp contrast, represents the case of radical countries, who view the Israeli aggression as a grave challenge to the Palestinian cause, urging them to “confront the enemy”. Upping the ante, Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei called upon the Palestinians to “build up their fighting power to stop Israel’s brutality.” Condemning Israel’s military actions against Palestinians, he warned that “Zionists understand nothing but the language of force, so the Palestinians must increase their power and resistance to force the criminals to surrender and stop their brutal attacks.”

However, Turkey seems to have surged ahead in condemning Israel. It lashed out at countries remaining silent over the “cruelty” unleashed by Israel over the Gaza Strip and the holy shrines of the old city of East Jerusalem. Calling Israel a “terror state”, it said: “Those who remain silent or openly back Israel’s bloodshed should know one day it will be their turn.”(Al-Monitor, May 14, 2021)

Turkey, which of late, was in the process of mending its ties with Israel and had held several rounds of meetings with the Israeli intelligence officials, launched a barrage of denunciations and verbal accusations, terming Israel as a “terror state” and called upon the international community to give a “strong and a deterrent lesson to Israel.” Quite contrary to its overtures to Israel, it has consistently refused to hold Hamas a terrorist organization. Turkish President Erdogan hosted a Hamas delegation led by its leader Ismail Haniyeh in August 2020, provoking strong resentment

by Israel. The latest Israeli military action will stall Turkey's efforts to bridge its relations with Israel, as seen by the increasing number of meetings between the Israeli and Turkish intelligence officials. In addition, Turkey has solicited global support calling for an "international force to protect Palestinians from the Israeli aggression" and to called upon the leaders of the Islamic nations – Malaysia, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Northern Cyprus, and the Russian President Putin, with whom he has a hate-love relationship. (Baibhawi, May 14, 2020.) However, observers view Turkey's outbursts more in light of its ambitions of donning the mantle of Khalifa of the Muslim world and positioning itself as a principal power in the Arab world than for its real concern for the Palestinian cause.

As ever, the latest round of violence between Israel and Palestine witnessed partisan politics by big powers. Statements issued by the United States at the very beginning of the conflict justifying Israel's seemingly disproportionate use of power against Hamas in Gaza, while vehemently criticizing the latter, clearly reflected the partisan stand of the United States and an indication to Israel to go ahead with its ruthless retaliatory strike against Hamas, which resulted in scores of killings of Gaza civilians. In his telephonic talks with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, the U.S. President Joe Biden extended his "strong support" to Israel while declaring that the latter has the "right to defend itself against rocket attacks from Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza." (Business Standard, May 16, 2021)

Following the suit of the United States, its allies too extended outright support to Israel, with the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas saying, "The rocket attack on Israel is unacceptable and must end immediately. Israel has in this situation, the right to self-defence. This escalation of violence can be neither tolerated nor accepted." Adopting a seemingly balanced approach, the European Union asserted "Palestinian rocket attacks into Israel were "totally unacceptable" and called upon all sides to aim for de-escalation and to prevent more civilian casualties. However, the EU foreign policy Chief Joseph Borrell also condemned the evictions of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, calling them illegal and saying they only served to fuel tensions. Giving a general message, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed his deep concern at the growing violence and called for urgent de-escalation of the hostilities between the two belligerent nations. In the same vein, Russian President Putin urged Israel and the Palestinians to halt fighting and "called on the parties to de-escalate tensions and peacefully resolve the emerging issues." (<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210512-world-reacts-as-violence-escalates-in-israel-gaza-conflict>)

The same discord and divisions were marked even with the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), a conglomeration of 57 Islamic countries of the world. This was witnessed in the emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) held virtually on May 16. Members, while denouncing the Israeli aggression, indulged in mutual blame game and accused each other of warming up to Israel. Slamming Saudi Arabia, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javed Zarif observed: "The massacre of Palestinian children today follows the purported normalization... This criminal and genocide regime has once again proven that friendly gestures only aggravate its atrocities." (Dawn, May 16, 2021.)

While some Arab countries like Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan already have diplomatic relations with Israel for several decades, new entrants recognizing or moving towards Israel were at the receiving end. Thus, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE were targeted by Turkey and Iran for recognizing/normalization of relations with Israel under the US-brokered 2020 Abraham Accords. Anguished by these countries, the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu joined Iran's Zarif in lashing out and saying: "There are a few who have lost their moral compass and voiced support for Israel", he said. "If there are half-hearted statements within our own family, how could we criticize others? Who will take our words seriously?" The classical contradiction is that while Ankara itself has close diplomatic and bilateral ties with Israel, it criticized others for being close to Israel. (Ibid)

INDIA'S RESPONSE: AMBIGUOUS OR 'CRAFTMANSHIP'

In sharp contrast, India's response to the current conflagration has been marked by extreme caution, pragmatism, and national interest. India's statements at the UN Security Council Open Debate and at the UN General Assembly debate left observers and analysts guessing and perplexed about India's actual position in the war. While some called India's UN address as 'pro-Palestine', others interpreted it as 'tacitly backing Israel'. While some termed it 'ambiguous', others described it as 'a treatise in craftsmanship'. These varied interpretations stem out of India's geo-political constraints and New Delhi's indirect but crucial stakes in West Asian politics.

To comprehend India's stand on the subject, it is important to bear in mind that India enjoys intensely close relations with both Palestine and Israel. Palestine has always been an emotive issue and an article of faith for India's foreign policy for a long. India was among the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine in 1988 and has, since then, continued to extend humanitarian aid and assistance. Besides, India has liberally contributed to the creation of infrastructure by way of building hospitals, schools, and libraries.

(https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Updated_Note_on_India-Palestine_Relations_for_MEA_Website.pdf) During the Covid-19 pandemic too, India supplied critical medicines and medical equipment as part of Covid-19 assistance to Palestine.

Similarly, relations with Israel, though established in 1992, have moved on from strength to strength since then. Today, the relations between the two are all-encompassing, with an ever-increasing bilateral trade touching US\$ 4.14 billion (*excluding defence*) during the period April 2020 – February 2021 with the balance of trade being in India's favour. Likewise, the defence ties over the years, have touched an all-time high, with Israel emerging as the second-largest supplier of arms for India and the latter its largest purchaser (SIPRI Fact Sheet 2021, *March 2021*)

India's response to the current cauldron should, thus, be seen against this background where it had to walk a tight rope and balance its relations with both countries. India's stand needs to be deciphered through its UN Security Council's Open Debate on May 16 and its UN General Assembly statement on May 20. India's permanent representative to the United Nations, T.S. Trimurti's address at the open debate on the Middle-East situation in the UN Security Council on May 16 implied much more than what met the eye. In his address, he referred to two things, which displayed India's pro-Palestinian stand and may have dismayed Israel. First, while reaffirming India's long-held position for an independent State of Palestine, he said, "...India reiterates its strong support for the just Palestinian cause and its unwavering commitment to the two-state solution." Second, his address made it clear that the violence began in East Jerusalem, saying, "our deep concern over the violence in Jerusalem, especially on Haram esh-Sharif/Temple Mount during the holy month of Ramzan and about the possible eviction process in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhood in East Jerusalem." India's observation was not off-the-mark as the foregoing account highlights the intense tensions that started building up with the Israeli actions in evicting the Arab families from Jerusalem's neighbourhood. India also urged both sides to "refrain from attempts to unilaterally change the existing status quo, including in East Jerusalem and its neighbourhood" and called for "the historic status quo at the holy places of Jerusalem, including Haram-esh-Sharif/Temple Mount must be respected." Here, again it implied that India was putting Israel in the dock as it was the latter who unilaterally attempted to change the status quo by forcefully evicting the Palestinian families and deploying security forces at the Al Aqsa compound. Without calling out names, India conveyed the message that the eviction of the Palestinian families has to be stopped by Israel. Supposedly, India's stand irked Israel as Benjamin Netanyahu did not tweet the Indian flag among

flags of 25 countries he tweeted with thanks, from the United States to Albania, that he said were "resolutely standing with Israel and supporting our right to self-defense".

However, notwithstanding the above, there was much more meaning to what was read out by the Indian ambassador, and that perhaps raised the eyebrows of many an analyst. The hidden message contained in the address, according to analysts, reflects India's pro-Israel tilt and its acute geo-strategic importance for India. For instance, India's detestation for Hamas was manifested in its condemnation for the Gaza rocket attacks without a corresponding criticism for the Israeli counter-attack. This subtly conveyed India's message that attacks by a non-State actor (Hamas) against a State is simply unacceptable and liable to be repulsed with full force. Without naming Hamas, to avoid giving legitimacy to the terrorist organization, India instead used the word "firing from Gaza" (and not Hamas), thus saying: "India formally 'condemns' indiscriminate rocket firings from Gaza targeting the civilian population in Israel". India's condemnation of the Gazan strikes was in stark contrast to the international response that sought to create a perception of Israeli aggression. Here, it is pertinent to note that India's condemnation was directed at the actions of a "non-State" actor (Hamas) against a State (Israel). Thus implicitly, India supported the retaliatory action by Israel, clearly sending the message that Israel reserves the right to retaliatory strike in self-defence. As India too is suffering from the scourge of terrorism, it extended its tacit support to Israel's action. (<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:83rXJl0k0QQJ:https://www.claws.in/israel-hamas-conflict-deciphering-the-indian-response/+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in>)

Secondly, while reaffirming India's support for a Palestinian State, it was silent on issues of East Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian borders. The omission of these two important terms marks India's clear departure from its long-held Indian position that East Jerusalem will be the capital of the proposed independent State of Palestine and the pre-1967 borders will determine the future Israeli-Palestine borders. The earlier position under the UPA government, as expressed by then Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh in November 2013, was that India supported "the Palestinian cause and called for a negotiated solution resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel". (<https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/23713/Statement+by+Permanent+Representative+of+India+during+the+Security+Council+Open+Debate+on+The+Situation+in+the+Middle+East+including+the+Palestinian+QuestionJuly+22+2014>)

This position was reaffirmed by then President Pranab Mukherjee, in October 2015. It was, thus, not a sudden change emanating from this war; rather it evolved with the inception of the Modi government in May 2014. This new position was manifested when India hosted the visiting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2015. Prime Minister Modi then obliquely conveyed this in his statement, which did not mention the Jerusalem and the border issues: He thus said: “[W]e hope to see the realization of a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, coexisting peacefully with Israel.”(The Hindu, May 17, 2021) While paying a return visit to Ramallah in 2018, Modi again reaffirmed this new position without any direct reference to the borders or Jerusalem. Thus, it’s no wonder why ambassador Trimuti’s address did not contain any reference to the twin issues of East Jerusalem and the Israel-Palestine border.

A careful reading of ambassador Trimuthi’s address further reveals the hidden part. While expressing shock at the loss of scores of lives, the statement does not make any reference to the disproportionate use of force by Israel that took a heavy toll of casualties. Further, Trimuthy’s statement twice mentions Haram-esh-Sharif but each time the reference comes with a hyphenated Haram-esh-Sharif/Temple Mount. This diplomatic language subtly conveyed the message that while the Palestinian control over Haram-esh-Sharif is accepted, the Israeli claim over Temple Mount cannot be disputed. There can be no exclusive Palestinian control over the entire Haram-esh-Sharif as Temple Mount lies under Jewish control. The statement reflects the need for a negotiated settlement between the two while conveying Israel’s legitimate claim over the Temple Mount. And to top it all, not even once the address makes any reference to the H-factor. This signals India’s disdain for Hamas, a terrorist organization, and also conveys India’s policy of not extending legitimacy to outlawed organizations, like Hamas. Even when India spoke of a “just Palestinian cause” and its “unwavering commitment to the two-State solution”, it was referring to the Palestinian Authority, and not the Gaza government of Hamas. India has always recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the true representative of the Palestinians and not Hamas- the terror outfit. and this position reflected once again, in Trimurti’s address: “These incidents have once again underscored the need for immediate resumption of dialogue between Israel and Palestinian authorities. The absence of direct and meaningful negotiations between the parties is widening the trust deficit between the parties.” Thus, while backing the PLO as the Palestinian’s legitimate body, India called for the resumption of the dialogue between the PLO and Israel.

Ambassador Trimuti’s address amply reflects that India has attempted to walk a thin rope, delicately balancing

its relations with both Israel and Palestine, for it can neither afford to antagonize the Arab world nor can it bear to lose the vital all-round Israeli support and friendship. However, analysts are divided over India’s response and are yet to decipher the real intent and message behind it.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The situation is grave and challenges manifold. Middle-East politics, involving Palestinian issues, is complex and difficult to be understood, as several regional and global actors and visible and hidden forces directly/indirectly affect Palestinian politics. Though over decades, several peace proposals have been worked out, unfortunately, each time it has failed. This, according to Prof. Shashi Shukla, a noted scholar on West Asian politics, is due to “diametrically opposite perspectives of the two parties (Israel and Palestine) to the dispute on issues like border security, Jewish settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem. There cannot be a lasting solution till these issues are amicably resolved.” This is unanimously felt by all concerned, including Israel and Palestine. In the current perspective, a viable solution to the vexed Palestinian problem calls for both immediate and long-term measures. (First Post, May 20, 2021.)

To begin with, certain peace-building measures (CBMs) need to be initiated at the earliest. Prime among them being reversing the proposed eviction of Palestinians from the Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, which is the immediate cause of current conflagration; facilitating the observance of religious rights of Palestinians over the Al Aqsa mosque and other holy shrines and resolving the dispute over land rights in the old city Jerusalem on an urgent basis.

These issues have been taken-up in the ongoing truce between Israel and Hamas, though serious provocations from both sides have given nightmares to the powers monitoring the ceasefire. These actions have to be matched with relevant concessions, starting from Israel, by way of easing the blockade of Gaza to allow humanitarian relief, fuel, and other goods to enter the Gaza city. It is to be noted that Gaza is blockaded by two of its neighbours, Israel and Egypt. Israel maintains that its national security necessitates imposing tight controls over its borders with Gaza to prevent Hamas from getting military hardware and increasing its military strength. Egypt, on the other hand, suspects that Hamas is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical Muslim organization of Egypt and hence, any nexus between the two will hamper its security.

Along with Israel, Hamas to needs to play its part, restraining militants and protestors from attacking Israel. This process needs to be backed by exchanging of prisoners captured by either side in the war. Responsibility also falls on the shoulders of western and Arab mediators to ensure the

smooth continuation of the ceasefire and its observance by both the warring sides. During the ceasefire negotiations, Hamas had warned the mediators to ensure the “protection of Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and ending the eviction of several Palestinians from their home in East Jerusalem”, describing it as “a red line”. It issued a tacit warning about the resumption of hostilities, saying “What comes after the battle of ‘Sword of Jerusalem’ is not like what came before because the Palestinian people backed the resistance and know that the resistance is what will liberate their land and protect their holy sites.” (<http://www.ganjampost.in/2021/05/21/cease-fires-can-be-fragile-and-short-lived-with-underlying-disputes-unresolved/>)

As a long-term measure, the reconstruction of Gaza city is a major priority for the international community. However, issues have cropped up with the United States’ announcement of providing a “rapid humanitarian assistance”, along with other international stakeholders, for the reconstruction of Gaza as it comes with a rider saying the humanitarian aid would be coordinated with the West Bank Mahmud Abbas government. “In a manner that does not permit Hamas to simply restock its military arsenal”. This is because Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by both Israel and the United States. With the rejection of direct aid to the Gaza government, indications are that this could snowball into a major controversy as Hamas, who is at loggerheads with the Abbas government, may disapprove of the U.S. assistance.

Further, the United States’ reconstruction efforts could hit a wall as international donors, in the absence of any guarantees ruling out the resumption of war at a future date, would not like to invest their funds into Gaza reconstruction. Highlighting this concern, Dennis B. Ross, a veteran American negotiator of peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians and the Middle East Policy for at least four U.S. Presidents, noted that “international donors would probably be wary without enforceable assurances that any investments would not go to waste as they all but certainly would if the group later reignited hostilities that would draw a harsh response from Israel.” (<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-05-20/hamas-to-keep-finger-on-trigger-after-ceasefire-says-official>)

Similar views were expressed by a 2017 Brookings Institution analysis, which concluded that the “reconstruction effort largely failed because of intractable political opposition to Hamas not only from Israel but also from Egypt, which opposes the militants’ ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.” The study disclosed that international donors were “slow to send money they had committed to the 2014 rebuilding effort in Gaza. The vast majority of donations that were unfulfilled,

three years after the ceasefire, had been pledged by Arab states in the Persian Gulf that also opposed Hamas’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.” Notwithstanding Muslim Brotherhood has renounced violence, it is believed they have links with extremist groups, including Hamas. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/us/politics/israel-gaza-hamas-biden-netanyahu.html>)

SUMMARY

Though the aforementioned challenges are stupendous, they are not insurmountable. Progress has taken place though at a snail’s pace. The western and Arab negotiators to the current ceasefire agreement amply realize that the non-resolution of the underlying causes of dispute will lead to the war once again. Past efforts by the international community to reconcile the deep divide between Israel and Palestine and to bring them to the negotiating table were not totally a waste of time and efforts. The fight for an independent State of Palestine, alongside the State of Israel under the ‘Two-State’ solution has met with some success. While for long, Israel squarely disapproved of the very idea of an independent Palestinian State and the latter to rejecting the existence of a Jewish State of Israel, consistent efforts of the international community bore fruits as Palestine gave an indirect recognition to the ‘Two-State’ solution in 1988. The Palestinian Declaration of Independence of November 15, 1988, which referenced the UN Partition Plan of 1947 and UN resolutions since 1947, in general, was interpreted as an indirect recognition of the State of Israel and support for a two-state solution. (Ibid) From the Israeli side, the melting of ice began with the Oslo Accords of 1993, where Israel acknowledged the PLO negotiating team as “representing the Palestinian people”, in return for the PLO recognizing Israel’s right to exist in peace, acceptance of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and its rejection of “violence and terrorism.”

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2307/2537663?journalCode=rpal20>)

On balance, the only solution to the vexed Palestinian dispute is the peace process, which has to be carried forward beyond the point the progress already achieved. India has vital stakes in the resolution of the Israel-Palestine imbroglio, as India enjoys close relations with both countries. Though India’s relations with Palestine proceed with that of Israel, the latter has emerged as an all-time friend for India, from trade-commercial relations to the net security provider. At the same time, Palestine is a window for India to strengthen its credentials with the Arab countries, where around 9 million Indian citizens reside and work, and who said billions of dollars of foreign remittance to India annually. For any lasting solution to the Palestinian issue, the aspirations of the Palestinians will necessarily have to be

taken into consideration and given a concrete shape. Alongside, the trigger points need to be capped, for with persisting sores there can be no healing. This can be fructified only through the largely-accepted ‘Two-State Solution’, which, however, is not acceptable to Israel at the moment. Nothing can better conclude the above discussion on a realistic note than the words of Prof. Shukla who observes that “the fact of the matter is that Israel is no longer a pariah state and the Palestinian issue has lost its emotive value and ideological appeal. The regional dynamics have changed totally. Israel is now seen as a partner, if not an ally, and the Arab states have accepted the reality of Israel as a regional power. It is to be seen, however, as up to what extent Turkey and Iran are willing to go and take up cudgels on behalf of the Palestinians.”(Los Angeles Times, September 10, 1993) These pragmatic observations of scholars provide a ray of hope in the settlement of the century-old Israel-Palestine conflict.

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