

## The Israel-Palestine conflict is at bend point

**A**s I watch the television and see Gaza being pulverised, I am informed that the apartment building I had lived in for two years in Gaza, between 1996-98, was bombed and brought down two weeks earlier. It was one of the taller buildings and I knew it did not stand a chance anyway. I keep wondering what has happened to my friends in Gaza, especially my landlord, Abu Zakary, and his lovely family and children, who made my life so much easier in a non-family posting. Are they still alive?

What Hamas did to Israel on October 7, 2023, was unacceptable. It was a brutal terror act. When I chaired the Counterterrorism Committee in the United Nations Security Council in 2022, one thing we all agreed on is that there can be no justification for terror. So, nothing should justify October 7 as well.

But does this make the Palestinian cause or the Palestinian fight against occupation by Israel for several decades any less justified? No, it does not. The UN Security Council's resolutions 242 and 338 embodied the principle of "Land For Peace". Israel should have ideally withdrawn from occupied land in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in return for peace, which is security, recognition, normalcy and peace for the peoples of the two States of Israel and Palestine. Interestingly, the revised 2017 Charter of Hamas too accepted a two-State solution based on the 1967 borders. Let us face it. The two-State solution alone can bring peace. A one State solution is a no-State non-solution.

Israel, understandably, cannot let Hamas terror go unchallenged. The infrastructure built by Hamas in Gaza needs to be dismantled. And the Israeli hostages released. For Israel, every Israeli life counts. But how much does a Palestinian life count for? Does it justify the killing of 8,000-plus Palestinian civilians in a mere 22 days, with children making up 40% (not counting hundreds under the rubble) vis-à-vis 9,600 casualties in 20 months of the Ukraine conflict? How many Palestinian lives are "acceptable" collateral damage?

### A dehumanisation

To make such a pounding of Gaza "acceptable", we have seen the West and their media equate Hamas with all 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza, so that they can be de-humanised and shown to be equally culpable. De-humanisation makes it easier to accept indiscriminate bombings without an outcry. But the West has also tried to equate the fight for Palestinian statehood with this fight



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against Hamas, to discredit the larger cause. This is dangerous.

Another western euphemism is the word "humanitarian" issues. Humanitarian assistance is to meet basic needs when for example faced with collective punishment by Israel on the Gazans through a blockade of water, food, medicines and electricity. But what is unfolding is a human tragedy – the killing of thousands of innocent lives and the mass displacement of 1.2 million Palestinians. There is not a humanitarian question here but a question of humanity itself.

### On the Arab world

While one can accuse the West of hypocrisy and double standards, what about the Arabs? Have they not been equally responsible for sidelining Palestine? In their race for normalisation with Israel, the Arab countries talked about the Palestinian issue and even said that Israel has agreed to stop further annexation (while Israel did the exact opposite by expanding settlements). Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu actually said that 'land for peace' has now been substituted by 'peace for peace' and was of the opinion that the real issue in West Asia was now Iran and not Palestine. While Palestine statehood was a footnote in their normalisation agreements with Israel, it is in danger of being reduced to a footnote to history. Even the present reaction of the Arab countries is to contain the popular support in their streets. Could not the Gulf countries have put their "oil clout" to better effect before the Israeli ground operations started? Normalising relations with Israel while ignoring the Palestinian issue will not give them security, especially when they are moving toward a more liberal governance in the Gulf.

Israel is no less complicit in this of course. Successive governments have strived to make the two-State solution more and more difficult. The current ultra-nationalist government of Israel is only an extreme manifestation since it has openly declared its opposition to a two-State solution. How else can one explain the fact that 250 Palestinian civilians were killed in the West Bank alone before October 7, where no Hamas is present? How else can one explain the untrammelled expansion of settlements and creating facts on the ground, with everyone watching helplessly this transgression of UN Security Council Resolution 2334? And, even more fundamentally, was it not Israel that nurtured Hamas to undercut the Palestine Liberation Organization and Fateh, and later President Yasser Arafat himself (including by

releasing the jailed spiritual founder of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin to Gaza)?

The irony of Israel-Palestine history is that it is only when there is a major violent conflagration that the Palestinian issue receives attention. Then comes agreement followed by Israel on the non-implementation. Violence begins again and then agreement, and so the 'kalachakra' moves on. The Yom Kippur war of 1973 led to the Israel-Egypt Camp David Accords in 1978 with the promise of Palestinian self-rule. When nothing happened, intifada came in 1987. Hamas came into existence. The intifada led to the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, with more promise of self-rule through the Palestinian Authority. Another round of backsliding, violence (even an election in between) and broken promises. Gaza is now widely acknowledged as the largest open-air prison.

So, here we are. Condemning Hamas – and rightly so – for this terror act but not acknowledging the omission and commission of the past is why the UN Secretary General warned that such incidents do not occur in a "vacuum".

As the former Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, said in an interview, the Gaza ground operations will throw up issues such as the retrieving of hostages, potential violations of international law by Israel, mounting civilian casualties and erosion of international support, possible regional flare-up, and, finally, identifying who to pass the baton to when the operations are complete. If operations prolong – and all indicators point to it dragging on – and civilian casualties mount and Gaza gets depopulated as refugees flow out, it will be an even bigger human disaster. It will potentially kill Palestinian statehood unless the 'kalachakra' brings about something more tangible than false promises.

### India's stand

While we have always stood for a two-state solution, India has rightly been wary of the fallout of terror acts in Israel on its neighbourhood. India is in sync with the Arab world in its normalisation with Israel, with groupings such as the I2U2 (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States). While we do not have a direct role yet, since it is time the U.S. and the West and the Gulf and the Arab world showed leadership first, any regional fall-out will affect us. Therefore, going forward, it is important for India to come out not just against terrorism but also more forcefully against the human tragedy playing out in Gaza. In this, its proximity with Israel and the U.S. will only be an asset. Go to Se

## The COVID-19 death toll in India, getting it right

The COVID-19 pandemic extracted a heavy mortality toll across the world during 2020 and 2021, and this has been a huge global public health concern. Given the challenges in direct causal attribution of deaths to COVID-19 infection, the international public health community emphasised the need to measure pandemic impact in terms of excess mortality, derived by comparing observed mortality during the pandemic with expected mortality based on pre-pandemic trends. Ideally, excess mortality estimation requires robust population-based mortality data from death registration systems.

### Gaps in registration data

India faced a big challenge in estimating excess deaths directly due to COVID-19 as death registration in India is still about 70%, which further varies widely across States and districts. Pandemic severity was particularly observed in India during the second wave in April-June 2021. India's death registration data also does not give weekly or monthly mortality data which is essential for excess death calculation.

To assess the mortality toll, independent investigators compiled mortality records from local offices of the government Civil Registration System (CRS) in 14 States and nine cities across India from January 2018 to May 2021. These were published in the media reports compiled in a data series published in *The Hindu*. Various scientific teams utilised these and other available mortality data from the Sample Registration System (SRS)



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There needs to be a task force of experts to analyse civil registration data

and household surveys to develop modelled excess mortality estimates for India.

COVID-19 related death estimates varied widely from one to another study – the highest was 4.7 million excess deaths in India during 2020-2021 using available local data as inputs for mortality models. There has been intense debate and controversy around the likely plausibility of various mortality estimates for India, which have focused on the statistical methods and data assumptions employed for estimation. However, most of these studies could not overcome some crucial biases in the input data for the modelling exercises, as well as in the assumptions applied to fill data gaps. Some studies are based on insufficient samples while others have information bias at various levels (<https://shorturl.at/btuYO>). It is very likely that the COVID-related excess deaths in India may have been overestimated.

### Set up a task force

The official CRS report for 2021 is scheduled for release shortly, and holds much promise for providing the best possible primary evidence. However, it may also lead to new debates if variations such as improvements in reporting, delayed registration, and remaining deficiencies in data completeness across States by sex and age are not considered and appropriately accounted for, while inferring from this data. Therefore, it is necessary that the government should convene a task force of national experts in this field to attend to this matter. This task force could be

provided access to all the microdata from the CRS, SRS, and other relevant data sources as necessary.

Once equipped with all the available and required information, the task force will be enabled to conduct a thorough analysis using standard statistical methods that utilise empirical data, to provide measures of excess mortality by sex and age at national, State and district levels.

### District-level interventions

Going forward, the imperative for accurate district-level mortality measures is urgent, for evidence-based health action to tackle the quadruple burden of maternal and child health conditions, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases and injuries. Hence, while the outputs of such a detailed analysis would complete the debate on pandemic mortality in India, the analytical operations will establish capacity for subnational mortality measurement, and also inform interventions to strengthen local data quality.

Concomitantly, there is also an urgent need to strengthen attribution of causes of death, either through medical certification for physician-attended deaths, or through the use of retrospective interview methods for household events. Taken together, the activities of the National Task Force for data analysis, along with proposed initiatives for data quality improvement, will vastly enhance the utility of the CRS for routine local and national mortality measurement in India.