

PALESTINE ISRAEL CONFLICT 2021

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Abstract

The conflict between Palestine and Israel originated in East Jerusalem. Jerusalem was recently declared by Israel as its capital thus trying to restore its historical claim to the city being the capital of the ancient state of Judah or Judea. While the global community did not recognize this claim by Israel, the previous US administration led by President Trump recognized the claim and also set up a US embassy in Jerusalem. Jerusalem has a unique distinction of having linkages to Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Though it is called the City of Peace, it has been in the eye of the storm for times immemorial. The city has been destroyed thrice, fought over 16 times, besieged 23 times and attacked 52 times. Understanding the conflict necessitates understanding the historical context of the unresolved and persistent conflict. The changing geo-political dynamics in the Middle East propelled by US distancing itself from the region, the increased domination of China in South China Sea, re-invigoration of the US - Iran Nuclear deal and the current Ukraine – Russia crisis have exacerbated the need to resolve the crisis at the earliest.

Keywords

Israel - Palestine Conflict, Hamas, Jerusalem, US interests in Israel.

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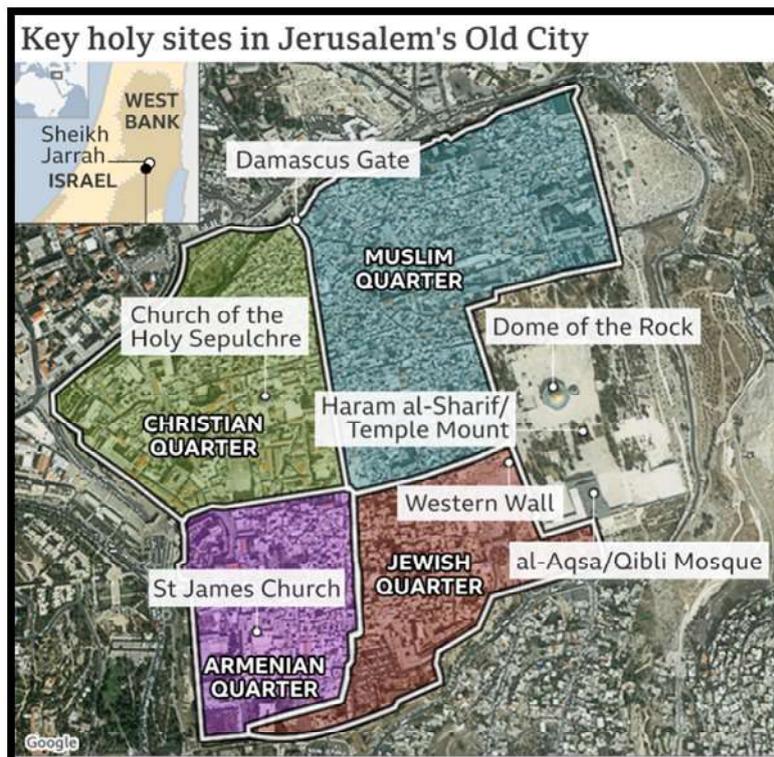
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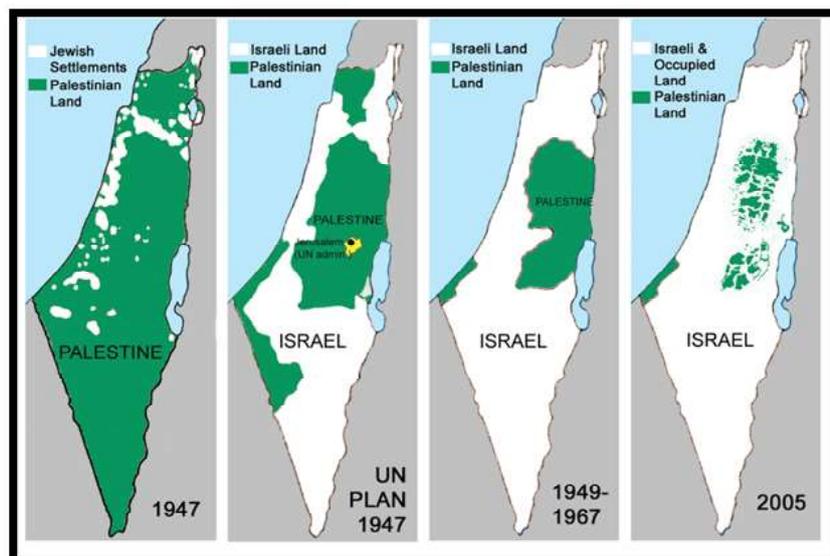
Religious Relevance of Jerusalem

Abraham is considered as the common link to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While Jews and Christians find their ancestries in the second son of Abraham ie Issac, Islam finds its ancestry in the elder son Ismael. Jews had two of their sacred temples in Jerusalem destroyed one by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the second during a Roman invasion in 70 CE. What remains of the second temple is referred to as the Western Wall and is considered to be the holiest site for Jews. The Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem is the third most holiest site for Muslims and it is believed that, it was from here that the Prophet ascended to the heavens. Adjacent to Al-Aqsa is the Dome of the Rock mosque with a gold plated dome constructed in 694 CE at the site of the Second Temple of Jews. Jerusalem also houses the Church of Sepulchre where it is believed that Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected. Jewish and Islamic religious sites are located on the Holy Hilltop referred to as Temple Mount, where as the Christian site is located in old Jerusalem. The courtyard of the Dome of Rock is referred to as the Noble Sanctuary. Jews consider it to be the location of the second Jewish temple.



Dispersion and Homecoming of Jews

Jews had been driven out of Judea and Israelite by the Roman empire and forbidden to return to the region. They scattered all over Europe but were persecuted wherever they went. Those who wanted to stay back were forced to convert to Christianity. The kingdom was renamed as Palestine. Jews faced persecution in the hands of crusaders in 11th century, were held responsible for poisoning of drinking water in the Rhine river region in 14th century and similarly oppressed and badgered throughout Europe. In the 19th century some Jews got together to launch Zionism – a religious, political and ideological movement to protect their identity. This movement was aimed at ending centuries of persecution and to take Jews back to their homeland. Thus they started the mass movement back to homeland. By 1903, approximately 30000 Jews had moved back to Palestine and by the beginning of the first World War the numbers had gone up by 40000. After the first World War British and French took control of the region once controlled by the Ottoman Empire which included the present day Israel, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan etc. British initially allowed the migration but an increase in ethnic violence between the Jews and Muslims in the region led to restrictions on the immigration in 1930. However, killing of 6 million Jews by Nazis in the holocaust forced Jews to flee from Europe to US and Palestine. By 1944, Jewish population had increased to 43% of the population in Palestine which galvanized the Western world to support their claim to a separate state. After World War II, Britishers and UN proposed to divide Palestine into two



parts between Arabs and Jews which was not agreed to by Arabs. Britishers left Palestine without any conclusive agreement between the factions finally leading Israel to proclaim independence in 1948. Palestinians consider themselves to have been wronged and since then animosity has persisted leading to eight wars, two Intifada's (uprisings) and armed conflict. With each conflict, Israel has gained additional real estate and Palestine has shrunk. East Jerusalem is under Israeli control since 1967 Mideast War along with West Bank and Gaza.

The Gaza Turmoil

The political status quo between Israel and Palestine and the status of Jerusalem have made frequent violent flareups between the two inevitable. Wars in 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021 have been fought with the aim to minimize the threat of Hamas and other militant factions. Israel has enforced strict blockade of Gaza that limits the flow of goods and people. Every time the humanitarian and economic pressure increases in Gaza, Hamas escalates, uses violence to generate domestic political support and pressurize Israel to ease the situation. Israel responds with its own escalation to include military strikes. Once fighting starts, it is not known by how much it will escalate- sometimes it ends swiftly and on other times like in the last four instances of 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021, it turns into an all out war. The war in 2014 lasted for 54 days while that in 2021 lasted 11 days.

Hamas and Politics in Palestine

Palestine militant group Hamas was formed during the first Intifada (uprising – 1987-1993) in 1987 with the aim to liberate Palestine. It is declared a terrorist organization by a large number of countries led by US. Most Arab nations have little love for it as it is a violent militant group backed by Iran. Hamas won the 2006 Palestine legislative election. The quartet of US, Russia, EU and UN made foreign assistance to Palestine conditional to non-violence. Hamas rejected the conditions of Quartet which led to withdrawal of financial assistance. Tension over the control of Palestinian armed forces led to the 2007 Battle of Gaza. Hamas took control of Gaza strip after which its members were ousted from West Bank and was under the control of the Fatah party. Following the 2014 Fatah – Hamas agreement, Hamas agreed Palestinian Authority (PA) to exercise control over Gaza. However, the agreement broke down in 2015 when PA government claimed it is unable to operate in Gaza. Elections were to be held in West Bank and Gaza in May 2021. Hamas has emerged with more popular support after every conflict with Israel.

Prevalent Political Environment of Israel

Israel has been in a state of political uncertainty over the past two years leading to four elections where no single party has been able to establish a clear

majority. PM Benjamin Netanyahu was the PM during this period. The last elections concluded on 23 Mar 2021. While, Netanyahu's Likud party emerged as the single largest party it has been unable to reach the magical figure of 61 seats to form a government. Negotiations amongst various parties for formation of a coalition were on at the time when the present war broke out. All parties have supported Israel's right to self defence. PM Benjamin Netanyahu expected to win the support of opposition post the war. However, he has long been seen as a polarizing and autocratic leader who has used divide-and-rule tactics to aggravate the many rifts in Israeli society - tensions between Jews and Arabs, within the Jewish majority, between his religious and nationalist base and his more secular and dovish opponents. Much of the opposition to Netanyahu's party was more due to the personal dislike for Benjamin Netanyahu than for the policies of the hardline ruling party. Naftali Bennett, a former ally of Netanyahu turned rival, became prime minister after the 60-59 vote in Jun 2021.

Actions Leading to The War in May 2021

The following events led to the war in May 2021:-

- Jews had been praying under the protection of Israeli Police in increasing numbers in the Noble Sanctuary on Holy Hilltop in East Jerusalem. This was against the agreement of 1967 and had angered the Muslims.

- After the hung verdict in elections on 21 Apr 21, 100 members of the extreme right Jewish group Lehava marched through central Jerusalem chanting "Death to Arabs" and attacking passer by Palestinians. Arabs attacked the extreme right Jews and this attracted further counter violence.

- Israeli President Mr Reuven Rivlin was addressing Israeli citizens close to Al-Aqsa mosque on 13 Apr 21. Apparently, a request by Israel to the mosque authority (wakf is controlled by Jordan) to avoid broadcasting prayers during the speech went unheeded.

- Fearing a backlash, Israeli Police imposed curfew and blocked access to Damascus gate on 13 Apr 21 a popular place in East Jerusalem where Arabs usually gathered in the evening during Ramadan. Palestinian youth launched what became nightly protests. Within days, ultra-nationalist Jews responded by marching through central Jerusalem toward Damascus Gate, chanting "death to Arabs".

- The situation was also inflamed by the decision of Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, on 29 April, to "indefinitely postpone" legislative elections in the occupied Palestinian territories scheduled for 22 May. Abbas likely feared that his fractured Fatah movement would fare poorly in the polls, but the reason he cited for the postponement was the absence of Israeli assurances that East Jerusalem residents would be permitted to participate.

○ Sheikh Jarrah a predominantly Palestine region of East Jerusalem also proved to be a catalyst. Israeli Supreme Court was to give a verdict on the possession of four houses occupied/owned by Arabs in this neighborhood in the first half of May.

○ Local Palestinians organized daily iftar sit-ins to break the Ramadan fast and protest the expulsions. These attracted the attention of ultra-nationalist Jews, who, accompanied by newly elected Knesset member Itamar Ben Gvir, entered Sheikh Jarrah on 10 May to disrupt the protests and at times assault those who had gathered peacefully. Israeli police fired sponge bullets, stun grenades and skunk water.



○ On 7 May 21 police raided Al-Aqsa mosque after violence between Arabs and Jews in East Jerusalem, at night firing stun grenades and rubber bullets on people who had gathered in the mosque. This was seen as a grievous insult by the Muslims.

○ On 8 May 21 bus loads of Palestinian citizens wanting to visit the Al-Aqsa mosque were stopped by Israeli police. Muslim worshippers at Temple Mount were attacked by the Police the same evening. The following day, Israeli forces again breached the compound, firing stun grenades and tear gas canisters at worshippers.

○ On 10 May, Palestinians set fire to a synagogue and police cars. A Jewish gunman shot dead a Palestinian during altercations, after which the government placed the city under a nightly curfew, which ultra-nationalist Jews subsequently breached. Police again raided the Al-Aqsa mosque but this time the Palestinians had stockpiled stones.



How Have These Events Differed From Earlier

○ Hamas unveiled its longer-range Ayyash rocket, firing one at Ramon International Airport outside Eilat at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Politically, this series of events was a wake-up call for those in Israel hoping that the conflict is “containable” or even largely over.

○ Hamas has broken from its Gazan confines by using its escalation with Israel to attempt to negotiate concessions on Jerusalem, not solely the lifting of the blockade on Gaza, as it had done in the past. In so doing, Hamas appeared to be usurping leadership of the Palestinian national movement from President Abbas and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority.

○ While the 2006, 2008-2009, 2012 and 2014 wars were all focused on Gaza, the round of fighting in 2021, including in Gaza, has reaffirmed the centrality of Jerusalem in the conflict.

○ With growing frequency, Palestinians in these protests raised calls for Hamas, a self-described Islamic national liberation and resistance movement, to step in and do something, clearly positioning the movement in Palestinian eyes as a bulwark against Israeli aggression in contrast with Fatah in the West Bank.

○ The novelty this time around has been the popular agitation of Palestinians throughout Israel-Palestine, as if boundaries had vanished which inevitably carry longer-term ramifications.

Prognosis

○ It's was troubling that the destruction of Gaza did not have any strategic purpose other than probably help invoke the nationalistic sentiment to bolster the prospects of Netanyahu politically and hence was Israel's most failed and pointless Gaza operation ever.

○ It is unlikely that the violence between the Palestinians and Israelis on the streets of Israel will subside anytime soon inspite of the ceasefire with Hamas. The fissures in the society are difficult to fill. A quicker ceasefire is likely to prevent a quicker unravelling of the social fiber.

○ Israel is likely to end the restrictions on Palestinians to the religious esplanade while the Waqf authorities likely to control stone throwing in Jerusalem. There is a likelihood of the eviction of Palestinians from East Jerusalem being halted at least for the time being but new points of conflict keep arising just like the latest case of eviction of approximately 75 palestinian families to make way for construction of a highway.

○ Diminishing interest of US to get militarily involved in Asia has created strategic space for greater involvement of Israel. Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince

Faisal bin Farhan said on 21 February 2022 that any rapprochement with Israel will come after reaching a just solution to the Palestinian cause, the lack of a political horizon for peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis would “strengthen the most extreme voices” in the region.

○ In the absence of the capability to conclusively answer the following difficult questions, the conflict is unlikely to come to a permanent closure. What should happen to the Palestinian refugees? Should Jewish settlements in West Bank stay or be removed? Whether Israel and Palestine should share Jerusalem? Should Palestine state be created alongside Israel?

○ Hamas has issued its demands but it is unclear as to what it will achieve beyond ceasefire and return to political status quo ante. Massive damage to facilities, capabilities and military capacity and command structure of Hamas is likely to leave it depleted. Hamas will emerge having fought for the rights of Palestinians as compared to the Palestinian Authority President Mohd Abbas. The ceasefire agreement has come in phases.

○ The first included the cessation of all Israeli attacks on Hamas infrastructure and facilities, and an end to Israeli attempts to kill senior Hamas members. Hamas halted all rocket fire at Israeli cities. Israel has also demanded that Hamas stop digging attack tunnels toward Israel and halt violent demonstrations on the Gaza-Israeli border.

○ In second stage, Israel has allowed the passage of goods and funds into Gaza. Officially, Israel has denied the existence of negotiations or the imminent signing of a deal, but that may be a tactic designed to put pressure on Hamas by showing that Israel does not fear further escalation. Hamas may be able to extract substantial concessions from Israel with respect to the blockade. Concessions with respect to Jerusalem are difficult to imagine.

○ Turkey and Qatar enjoy proximity to Hamas, but Egypt, because of its longstanding interest in what happens on its northern border, is particularly well suited for mediating negotiations.

The longer the conflict continues, the larger are the chances of it getting spilled to domestic politics of US. Moreover the conflict in Europe & South China Sea is already demanding most of the US foreign policy time. Hence US is likely to bank on Israel playing a more important role in the Middle East. The U.S. remains ironclad - I'll keep using that word - in our support of Israel's security and its regional stability. Presently apart from the Palestinian issue, the Nuclear deal with Iran and the Ukraine crisis make the US-Israel relationship torn between their respective geo-political interests. In case of being asked to choose sides in the present conflict

in Europe, Israel will be forced to side with the US despite its vested interest in security cooperation with President Vladimir Putin, whose troops cast a dark shadow in Syria. The conflict incase continues is likely to weaken US-Israel ties.

Arab nations are likely to wait and watch to ascertain the future of Abraham Accord. Arab state media coverage of the war in May 2021 was not as one sided as it used to be. Arab governments know that they have an enormously lot to gain from partnership with Israel especially in the field of cutting edge technology, trade, tourism, green economies and scientific development. The relationship is likely to get more complex due to the increased involvement of China and Russia and distancing of the US from Middle East security situation. China's recent investments in the region and willingness to share missile technology with Saudi Arabia as a counter to Iran makes them major stake holders in the region and likely to give additional leverage over the Middle Eastern shatterbelt.

Implications

Israel is definitely in a Catch 22 Situation. Over the years of conflict neither Hamas nor Israel have shown any strategic vision. Israel has rejected a call by right wing extremists to invade Gaza strip as it does not want to take responsibilities of 2 million impoverished population and devastated infrastructure.

Buildup to the present situations has been severely marred by communal violence. Israel has already declared it to be more dangerous than rockets of Hamas. While a two front war for Israel that is Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon was envisaged as Israel's biggest crisis, civil violence now has recasted this crisis. Violence this time around has been successful in uniting people in various pockets in West Bank and Gaza.

Jerusalem is likely to be a bone of contention as both Israel and Palestine aim to declare it as capital. Use of Jerusalem as an issue of negotiation, release of prisoners taken during the conflict and expulsions from Sheikh Jarrah indicates the larger role that Hamas is likely to play in the Palestine conflict in future.

Palestinian Authority has been largely silent during the conflict. It has criticized UN for failing to produce a joint statement. It is likely to loose popular support of Palestinian people after the conflict ends. Hamas controlled Gaza already has an unemployment rate of 50%, if the number of casualties in the ongoing conflict rises Hamas is likely to loose popularity with Palestinians too thus making Fatah the best alternative

The quartet formed under the US President George W Bush is likely to be reconvened to promote the Israel- Palestine peace process. Buying time is likely to bring Israel at a better bargaining position.

China has watched US take divergent stands during the conflict in Israel and Ukraine in the UN. It is likely to use this to pressurize the international community whenever a discussion on Syria or Xinjiang is triggered in the future.

In spite of the Abraham Accord the Arab nations are likely to keep Israel at an arms distance. Engagements if any are likely to be in private and behind closed doors. Administration in Arab nations does not want to be seen amongst its population to be overlooking the massacre of Palestinians during the war.

Iran is likely to use this as a ploy to clandestinely fund as well as arm the Hamas. Israel's attempts to scuttle any nuclear deal between Iran and US is likely to be jeopardized given the advancements made in the negotiation between all the parties. US will have to maintain a fine balance while walking the tight rope between the two issues in the region.

Brokering peace between the fighting factions will also reinforce the strategic importance Egypt has enjoyed since the Abraham Accord has threatened its status. Smuggling of weapons to Gaza through Egypt has contributed to Islamic insurgency in Egypt and hence Hamas is also likely to see dwindling support from Egypt.

Conclusion

Israel should denounce violence and incendiary hate speech, no matter the source, and mete out impartial justice to all. Israeli officials have a particular responsibility to combat ethnic hatred emanating from the Jewish far right and to make sure Palestinian citizens are protected from both police and civilian violence in the same way that Jewish citizens are. Palestinian leaders in Israel have a parallel obligation within their own communities. Tamping down ethnic incitement is a matter of self-preservation for the Jewish majority, because the alternative, a steady escalation of civil strife, is already on the horizon.

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