

A New Turn in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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The tale of Palestine from the beginning until today is a simple story of colonialism and dispossession, yet the world treats it as a multifaceted and complex story—hard to understand and even harder to solve (Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken a new turn with the recent developments in the holy city of Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. The conflict is often characterised as one of the most protracted crises in modern history, complex to understand and difficult to solve. For the last few days, videos and images posted on media show alarming scenes of chaos in and around the holy city of Jerusalem. If one image depicts some worshipers seeking shelter from explosions and Israeli aggression, and others show images of protesters throwing stones at the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). The social media are flooded with such images, expressing solidarity with the Palestinians, criticising Israeli atrocities, the role of the United States (U.S.) and Hamas' militancy.

The whole episode of the clash between the Palestinians and Israeli forces erupted after a raid by the latter on the Holy Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. From Gaza, Hamas militants responded by firing rockets at Jerusalem, drawing airstrikes from Israel in return. As of now, the incident left more than 145 Palestinians and Israelis dead,

and hundreds from both the ends wounded. One of the primary reasons for the escalation of new clashes is the conflict and controversy over the recent efforts of the Israeli government to remove Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah,¹ a historically and strategically important part of the holy city. The Palestinians saw the moves as illegal and an attempt of ethnic cleansing. The Israelis, especially the right-wing Jews, say they were fighting for their property through which they attempt to ensure the Jewish dominance over East Jerusalem.

Reactions poured in from various corners of the world as the violent clashes escalated between the two. The neighbouring Arab and Islamic countries, the EU and other nations across the globe called for a lowering of tensions, right of peaceful worship and respect for international law. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) held an emergency consultation on Monday over the growing tensions between the Palestinians and Israel. But the U.S. prevented the release of a joint statement by the UNSC. However, the draft statement states that the UNSC members would voice "their grave concern regarding escalating tensions and violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem," which Israel annexed and considered part of its capital. It also called for "exercise of restraint, refraining from provocative actions and rhetoric, and upholding and



respecting the historic status quo at the holy sites" (Magid 2021; Lederer 2021).

Root Causes of the Conflict

The creation of Israel and the emergence of Arab Israeli conflict are rooted in a European colonial project mainly with the British interest. The colonisation project has only modernised its face and has subjected Palestinians to frequent military occupation, land dispossession, annexation, displacement and unequal rights. Even after more than seven decades, the wounds of the *Nakba*² are still there, as Israel prohibits the right of return of over five million Palestinian refugees. At the same time, it guarantees citizenship to anyone having a Jewish ancestry. There are many factors and forces that played different roles in creating such an unending crisis in West Asia. The important among those are; Aliyah,³ Sykes-Picot agreement,⁴ Balfour declaration,⁵ the collapse of Ottoman empire, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 181,⁶ and finally the creation of Israel on 14 May 1948.

Over the years, the Palestinians, represented by neighbouring Arab countries,⁷ and the newly created the State of Israel fought each other many times and so tensions rose in the region. When the Arabs name the first war in 1948 as *Al-Nakba*, Jews perceived it as 'the war of independence,' which ultimately led to the dispossession and displacement of Palestinian Arabs and further expansion of Israel by swallowing the Palestinian land. Gaza and the West Bank were annexed by Egypt and Jordan, respectively. The Six-Day War in 1967 resulted in the Israeli occupation of territories of neighbouring Arab

countries and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. The region witnessed another war in 1973, known as the Yom Kippur. Since then, there was no combined Arab attack against Israel though skirmishes occurred at regular intervals. After the combined Arab forces' failure to protect the interests of Palestinians to create an independent Palestine state, they were instrumental in the formation of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)⁸ and attacks against Israel by many militant organisations. The emergence of Hamas also marked a new turn in the movement. Parallel to the unending conflict between the Arabs and Israel, there were peace processes too—from the Camp David Accord⁹ in 1979 to Abraham Accord¹⁰ in 2020. But nothing settled the issues and bring real peace.

The current episode of violence in and around Jerusalem erupted against the backdrop of political instability and uncertainty in both the Palestine Authority (PA) and Israel. The former has recently cancelled what would have been the first general elections in 15 years. The latter witnessed four elections in just two years to have a stable and permanent government. Now, Benjamin Netanyahu serves as a caretaker Prime Minister. He also faces trial on multiple corruption charges. Along with the political crises, there is a severe legal battle between the Palestinians in the occupied territories and Israeli authority on the eviction of the former from Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem. The far-right Jewish group lawmakers also tried to mark Jerusalem Day¹¹ by forcing their way into the Palestinian streets listed for eviction (Kingsley and Isabel 2021). Thus, Jews celebrate Jerusalem Day and Muslims marked the final days of Ramadan at a time when a lengthy legal battle on the eviction of Palestinians near



to the East Jerusalem was about to conclude. During Ramadan, large number of Palestinian Muslims used to visit Jerusalem where Masjid al-Aqsa¹² is situated. Anyhow there were provocations from both the end to create violence in the holy city. So, it would be difficult to analyse the recent crisis without looking at the significance of Jerusalem in defining and designing the conflict between the two groups.

Significance of Jerusalem

Jerusalem has been at the centre of much of the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to UNGA resolution 181, Jerusalem was proposed to be an international zone. However, Israel controls the city—captured the western half in 1948 and the eastern part¹³ in 1967. The paradox related to the holy city is the inseparability of its spiritual and political importance. When it comes to its spiritual connection or holiness, it is a holy site for the three monotheistic religions in the world—Muslims, Christians and Jews.

The Muslim Quarter is the largest of the four and contains the shrine of the Dome of Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque on a plateau known to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary. The mosque is the third holiest site in Islam and is under the administration of an Islamic trust called the Waqf. Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad travelled here from Mecca during his night journey and prayed with the souls of all the prophets. A few steps away, the shrine of the Dome of the Rock holds the foundation stone, where Muslims believe Muhammad then ascended to heaven. Muslims visit the holy site all year round, but every Friday during the holy month of Ramadan, hundreds of thousands of Muslims come to pray at the mosque (BBC 2014).

The Western Wall is an important worship site for Jews and the holiest site for Jews worldwide. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is where global Christians believe that Jesus was preached, crucified, entombed and resurrected (Schulson 2018). Now all these sites are important pilgrimage sites for believers belonging to both the communities worldwide. “It has been conquered, destroyed and rebuilt time and again, and every layer of its earth reveals a different piece of the past” (BBC 2014). Regarding the political transformation and trajectory of Jerusalem, King David took the holy city from the Jebusites 3,000 years ago and made it the capital. In 587 B.C, the capital city was destroyed by the Babylonians. Since then, it was under the control of different powers- Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Crusader Kingdom, Egyptians, Ottoman Turks, the British mandate, and the Jordanians. It has been under the occupation of Israel since 1967 (Stern 2000). The Israeli government has concentrated much of their efforts on the Judaization of Jerusalem. They have successfully confiscated 86 per cent of the holy city and filled it with Jewish immigrants.

Mohsen M Saleh explains:

Within more than seventy years, Israel has reached an advanced strategic position in the heart of the Arab and Muslim world. It has become the place for the largest gathering of the world's Jews (about 47% of the world's Jews). It enjoys a military status superior to the region's armies; an institutionalized political system capable of efficiently managing its differences; an advanced economy and high per capita income, even compared to Western European countries; a scientific, technological and industrial superiority over all the countries of the region; an artificial international "legitimacy" cover, and an unprecedented support of major



powers. Israel has achieved remarkable breakthroughs in the normalization with official Arab regimes, and succeeded in managing the peace settlement file in a way that serves its expansionist ambitions and dwarfs and weakens the Palestinian national project (Saleh 2021).

The question here is who will control the holy city forever, or if split up, how could it be partitioned? Marwan Bishara of *Aljazeera* opines, “Jerusalem highlights Israel’s greed and Palestine’s creed like no other. The Palestinians generally accept to share the city, but the Israelis mostly insist on having it all for themselves, come what may” (Bishara 2021).

Life of Palestinians under Israeli Occupation

The lives of Palestinian people under Israeli occupation have always been a matter of discussion for politicians, media, and human rights activists globally. Every measure implemented by the Israeli authority for the safety of its citizens ultimately restricts the rights of Palestinians to move and develop. In this apartheid-like socio-political and economic structure imposed by the settler-colonial state of Israel, Palestinians need to obtain different levels of authorization in their everyday lives. Arabs having Israeli citizenship are also subject to discriminatory practices in various walks of life. Even the Palestinian life under PA jurisdiction is also heavily shaped by the Israeli occupation (Avelar and Bianca 2018).

Nathan J Brown observes,

It is time to admit what most observers already know: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that diplomats have been dealing with for half a century is over. It is not that a solution has been found. Just the opposite: all the injustices and insecurities that afflict inhabitants of the region

between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea are now so deeply ingrained in daily life that no diplomatic framework can address them now. This leaves some people far better off than others, of course—and it leaves many quite satisfied. But even the smug have cause for worry—less about their own lives and livelihood and more about the world to be inhabited by their children and grandchildren. And many others are left stateless, restricted in movement, harshly policed, and pondering how to provide for their family’s needs now rather than for future generations (Brown 2021).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its report published in 2021 narrates,

Israeli authorities in 2020 systematically repressed and discriminated against Palestinians in ways that far exceeded the security justifications they often provided. For a 13th consecutive year, the government enforced a generalized travel ban on Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip and sharply restricted the entry and exit of goods. These restrictions, not based on an individualized assessment of security risk, robbed with rare exceptions the 2 million Palestinians living there of their right to freedom of movement, limited their access to electricity and water, and devastated the economy. Eighty percent of Gaza’s residents depend on humanitarian aid (HRW 2021)

“The Israeli occupation, repression, disruption, discrimination, property confiscation or home demolition are a decades-long daily affair. Likewise, racist and violent provocations by Israeli fanatics are common practice in the occupied Palestinian territories,” says Marwan Bishara of *Al Jazeera*. There were a series of peace processes and agreements signed between different governments and even with PLO and Israel. Unfortunately, none proved fruitful and sufficient to end the plight of Palestinians.



Here the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi holds significant. He says:

Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs. What is going on in Palestine today cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct..... Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home.... Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 1938: 239).

The political, economic and social status of the Palestinians living in refugee camps in the region, inside Israel and in the OPT need to be addressed. So far, the efforts made by various regional and international mediators to solve the issue on a 'final map' that satisfies both the Jews and Palestinians remain fruitless notwithstanding the considered views of great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi (Pulikkalakath 2020). It also raises the question if a third *intifada*¹⁴ is round the corner with growing unrest in the West Bank and Gaza.

Conclusion

The plight of Palestinian refugees uprooted by the unending Arab- Israeli conflict tells the story of one of the world's longest-running displacement crises. Now a durable solution appears as only a distant dream as more than seven decades have passed without a step forward. Various international agencies like the UN have condemned Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in multiple resolutions and votes, declaring such acts to be illegal under the Geneva convention and international law. However, Israel

continues its expansionist policy by intensifying occupation, settlements, and annexation of more Palestinian land. It ultimately dictates the Palestinians' dream of creating a viable state even in a small part of the historic Palestine. Here, Israel will face strategic challenges in its current international relations and the threat of peaceful existence in the troubled region. The principal victims of the whole episodes of violent clashes are the Palestinians, but Jews will also have to pay for a secure life. There are already reports of emergency declared in parts of Israel. As Edward W. Said noted, "You cannot continue to victimize someone else just because you yourself were a victim once—there has to be a limit."

Notes

1. Sheikh Jarrah, a place named after a personal physician to Salahuddin Ayyubi, the Muslim conqueror who seized Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187. The place lies about 500 meters from the Old City's (Jerusalem) Damascus Gate. See *Al-Arabia News* (2021): "East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah becomes emblem of Palestinian struggle," 11 May, <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2021/05/11/East-Jerusalem-s-Sheikh-Jarrah-becomes-emblem-of-Palestinian-struggle>
2. In Arabic, it literally means catastrophe. It denotes the demolition of nearly 600 Palestinian villages and subsequent massive exodus of



more than seven lakhs of Palestinians from their mother land by the newly created state of Israel in 1948.

3. A Hebrew word which means “ascent or going up”. It is the immigration of Jews from Diaspora into Palestine/ Israel. Though began in 1882, it took several phases and intensified during the time of anti-Semitism in Europe and particularly in times of Holocaust in Nazi Germany.
4. The 1916 deal is also known as Asia Minor Agreement. The secret deal was mainly between Britain and France during World War II to determine the post War partition of the Ottoman lands in the Arab Middle East.
5. In 1917, the British government formally extended its support in the form a letter send to a Zionist leader. It clearly says, “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”. This controversial letter has great significance as it led to an increase in the number of Jewish immigration and subsequent Arab revolt in Palestine.
6. The 1947 UNGA resolution also known as the Partition Plan. It proposed to divide the British Mandate of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states.
7. Particularly Egypt, Syria and Jordan.
8. The PLO was formed to liberate Palestine through armed struggle. But later its leader Yasser Arafat forced to give up arms and came to negotiation with Israel. The organization was the sole legitimate representative of Palestine in many international bodies including the UN and Arab League.
9. The agreement resulted in ending hostility between Egypt and Israel and the former became the first Arab country to recognize the latter.
10. Peace deal between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain under the mediation of the USA.
11. It marks the capture of East Jerusalem in the third day of Six Day War in 1967 and the unification of the holy city by Israel.
12. The third holiest site for Muslim believers
13. But the mosque is under the administration of Palestinian/ Jordanian Islamic Waqf.
14. The Arabic term *intifada* means shaking off. It refers to the either of two (1987-1993, 2000-2005) popular uprisings in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The two demonstrations were against Israel to end its occupation and settlement of those territories and also aimed to create an independent Palestinian state.



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