

Essay

Israel and Hamas War 2023: Lessons for India

Rakesh Sharma

October 7, 2023 was a special day in Israel, Simchat Torah, which concludes the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Early morning saw a barrage of thousands of projectiles being sent from Gaza all over Israeli territory, including Jerusalem. With this barrage of rockets, around 3,000 militants breached the Gaza-Israel barrier and attacked Israeli military bases and civilian population centres. Many of the Hamas terrorists crossed the border by land, air and sea with bulldozers breaching fences ingressing to a depth of up to 24km. In the catastrophic Hamas assault, its terrorists slaughtered ruthlessly over 1200 including women and children, and kidnapped nearly 250. "Israel is at war," declared Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Indeed, the dastardly physicality of the attack and its shock-effect caused deep and lasting scars on Israel's national psyche and on the global geopolitics

What Hamas undertook was a militarily and professionally planned, well-coordinated, highly complex operation, conducted precisely. The assault required intensive training and equipment, and a superb blanket of operational secrecy. The planning had clear indications of experienced conventional-military planning, most unlike the prowess of a terrorist organisation like Hamas. However, the assault was executed exactly the way a brutal and cruel terrorist organisation would, most unlike a professional military, with celebratory videos of barbarism uploaded as the worst- quality advertisement! Israel has known attacks and wars, but never on such a scale since the holocaust, when a single morning shattered its sense of impunity.

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel has been called Israel's 9/11, comparable to the spectre of the falling Twin Towers. The war has sparked widespread global protests focused on the implementation of a ceasefire. How did the situation get to this point and what, if any, are the lessons for India.

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Short History: The Whys and Wherefores

The history of the region and Jews and Palestinians is exceedingly long, complex and complicated; it is also well researched. Suffice here to say that the First Intifada of 1987, the Oslo Accords of 1993, the Camp David Summit of 2000, and the Second Intifada finally led to Israel's military withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Following 2006, when the Hamas won the majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council, it took full control of the Gaza Strip. Simultaneously, Israel imposed a blockade, a siege restricting the flow of goods and people in and out of Gaza. For the initial seven years, with the plethora of tunnels from Gaza to Sinai, Hamas had access to Egypt, which sustained its political economy. The new Egyptian Government in 2014, closed the tunnels to Sinai. This changed the functioning in Gaza, with Hamas attempting an alternative strategy of reunification with the Palestinian Authority (PA). However, this policy failed with the PA cancelling elections in April 2021.

In the period 2021-2023, Hamas gave the impression of having changed tack, looking towards Israel to obtain legitimacy for Gaza as a political mini-state and hoping to end the blockade and obtain release of Palestinian prisoners. However, several issues goaded Hamas to the barbaric, brutal and dastardly attack. Arab Barometer, a resource for quantitative research on Arab countries, in its recent survey (October 2023) in Palestine, offers a unique insight into the views of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. Significant findings in the survey were as follows:

- A majority of Palestinians (51%) supported a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, with slightly more support seen among residents of Gaza than among West Bank Palestinians.
- A quarter of respondents also said they supported “armed resistance” as a preferred solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- About 75% of people living in Gaza said they face food insecurity — nearly a 25% increase from the Arab Barometer’s 2021 survey.
- About 23% of respondents said they have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in Hamas; 52% had no trust at all in Hamas.
- Nearly 80% believed the economic situation in Gaza and the West Bank is bad or very bad.
- 68% said food availability is a problem to a great or medium extent.

- A majority — 56% — believed Palestine’s economic situation would be somewhat worse or much worse in the coming years.
- Most felt that the country’s economic situation was the most important challenge, followed by instability and corruption.

The rationale for the onslaught of October 07, 2023 can simplistically be attributed to 56 years of occupation, 16-year long blockade of Gaza by Israel, the ad-lib expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the issues of the Al Aqsa Mosque. Indeed, the living conditions in Gaza were difficult, with people struggling to feed their children. The Strip was more or less controlled by Israel, relying largely on 300-400 trucks of aid daily. Two critical issues need examination.

First, intensive geopolitical shifts have been taking place in the region and greater West Asia in recent years, such as the Abraham Accords of August 2020 and the series of agreements to normalise relations between Israel and UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. A number of these countries benefitted, with UAE getting F16s, Morocco getting sovereignty over Western Sahara and Sudan being removed from the sanctions list. An Abraham Fund was set up as a part of the Accord and it delegated approximately 3 billion USD to development initiatives in the Middle East. Further, the I2U2 (Israel, India, UAE and the US), an offspring of the Abraham accords, was formed and came to be unofficially described as the “West Asian Quad” and the “Indo-Abrahamic construct.” As part of the G20 Meet of September 2023, an agreement was signed on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) between India, the US, Saudi Arabia, UAE, the European Union, Italy, France, and Germany. The proposed IMEC will consist of railroad, ship-to-rail networks and road transport routes extending across two corridors, that is, the East Corridor — connecting India to the Arabian Gulf and the Northern Corridor — connecting the Gulf to Europe.

China, meanwhile, stepped up to a larger role in this region. It brokered a landmark agreement between the regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. Saudi Arabia was also reportedly discussing the possible resumption of consular services with Syria. Iran meanwhile, after severing ties in 2016, has appointed an ambassador to the UAE. Most significant was the proposed normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Middle East apparently was under intense political upheaval, power shifts and rapprochement, a break from the status quo of the kind unseen previously.

It can well be construed in Gaza and the West Bank that the Arab countries are gradually decoupling from the Palestine question. Palestinians could understand that

their cause was being marginalised by agreements being reached by Israel with the Arab states. To bring the Palestinian cause back on the high table, an event that would force a massive, disproportionate response by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians would be essential. Normal pin-pricking rockets and missile fire would be insufficient to invoke a massive reaction. Hamas hence planned the brutal offensive that would cut through the national psyche and force the hands of the Israeli Government. This also had to be sooner than later, in the light of the intensive endeavours in West Asia for 'rapprochement' with Israel, which would foreclose any window of opportunity to centre-stage the Palestine question.

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The second is the Gaza versus West Bank dilemma. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank are two Palestinian territories that were part of the Mandate of Palestine and were captured by Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967. More than two million Palestinians, of whom over 50 percent are children, live in about 365 sq. km of Gaza. There is over 97 percent literacy and 60 percent unemployment in the age group of 15 to 29. With poor living conditions, health system and infrastructure, the 16-year blockade was felt by the Palestinians as a collective punishment which had exacerbated their dire economic and social conditions. In comparison, the West Bank has 5,860 sq km of territory with 2.7 million Palestinians and nearly 6,00,000 Jews in settlements that cover 60 percent of the occupied territories.

For years, various Israeli governments took an approach of divide and rule between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, aimed against a united Palestinian Authority and even propped up Hamas. Hamas too worked hard on creating illusions of a growing relationship with Israel. It was, hence, the beneficiary of Israel's policy of holding indirect negotiations via Egypt and was allowed to receive infusions of cash from abroad, largely from Qatar. Hamas also managed to obtain 20,000 work permits for Gazan labourers from Israel, to allow them to earn better salaries, meaning food for their families and the ability to purchase basic products. Even sporadic attacks by Hamas from Gaza were overlooked by Israel, or only minor responses were undertaken. Hamas in Gaza was getting more acceptable in comparison to the Palestinian Authority based in the West Bank.

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Since Hamas named its bloody assault *Operation Al Aqsa Flood*, the Al Aqsa Mosque needs a mention. In Palestine, it was being felt by many that with the rightist Israeli

Government in power, the nationalist Jews may attempt to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem's Old City that had been destroyed around 70 CE (Common Era) in the Roman period. The Al Aqsa Mosque was built on the Temple Mount, the site of Solomon's temple, between 685-715 CE under the Umayyad Caliphate. The revival of ancient hymns by the Jews, import of sacrificial cows, and changing popular mood had given rise to apprehensions among the Palestinians about the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. Hence, in the West Bank it was felt the situation on the ground was likely to implode at some point, like another Intifada, with a notable shift in the political and security situation.

The very clever pre-emptive strike by Hamas has exhibited the failure of the intelligence agencies, Mossad and Shin Bet, to pick up planning and training for the assault, that included bulldozers, motorcycles, boats and paragliders. It also includes failure of imagination and strategic analysis; believing that a larger threat was posed by the West Bank, Israel moved some military units from Gaza.

Analysis of Israeli Offensive

The bloody terror assault was an overreach by Hamas as a terrorist organisation, it was not a mass uprising or an Intifada. It is apparent that Hamas did not have a serious follow-up offensive plan or a planned end-state to the onslaught. Why is it, then, that the execution of this brutally planned operation was felt so advantageous that it overlooked the costs that would follow? It appears increasingly that Hamas banked on support from the Arab/Muslim States and the world at large to curtail Israel's military response. It badly miscalculated.

The terror inflicted on the civilian population in Israel is so enormous that the wounds from it will not heal for years, with the challenge compounded by the large numbers abducted into Gaza as hostages. Naturally, the Israeli Government could not backtrack, under pressure from ultra-rightist parties. With ferociousness and the brutality of its assault deeply affecting and anguishing the national (and international) psyche, Israel commenced a strong military offensive in Gaza that continues till date.

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Hamas meanwhile, has brought great misery to the population of Gaza, by provoking the Israeli offensive. Israeli Government hence decided on a maximalist end-state to operations against Gaza; an offensive to 'destroy' Hamas, including its ability to govern, destroy its underground infrastructure and military-like wherewithal. The bombing campaign undertaken by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), followed by the ground

campaign has been very costly in terms of civilian deaths, especially of women and children, and infrastructural damage. Clearing Gaza City, finding Khan Younis of Hamas, and rescuing hostages from the labyrinth of tunnels in the maze of urban setting are indeed herculean tasks. Some exchange of hostages, however, has taken place.

Israel's declaration of a state of war marked the start of the most significant military escalation in the region since the Yom Kippur War in 1973. By December 10, 2023, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, more than 17,000 Palestinians, including over 7,000 children, have been killed, making this the deadliest war for children in modern times. The United Nations reported that around 1.9 million Palestinians, more than 85 percent of Gaza's population, and around 500,000 Israelis have been internally displaced. While the world is focused on the war in Gaza, tensions have risen in the occupied West Bank too, where over 270 Palestinians have been killed and more than 3,365 others injured in clashes with Israeli troops and Jewish settlers.

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It can easily be fathomed that Gaza cannot be bombed into oblivion. Killing of leaders will be inconsequential in the long run for the hydra-headed Hamas, as Hamas is also an ideology that needs to be suppressed, else the leadership will regenerate. Consequent to the occupation of Gaza by Israel the subsequent administration will be like a quagmire! With West Bank temperatures also rising, Hezbollah throwing its hat in the ring, it is an exercise in futility to prognosticate the future course or any way forward. The status quo in West Asia has been altered, perhaps for all times to come.

Broad Lessons from the Israel-Hamas War

While the war is ongoing, lessons must be constantly learnt and evaluated. Six lessons as relevant to India need examination. First, National security is national. Hamas has admitted that the domestic divergences in Israel led to the belief that the situation was ripe for an attack of that magnitude. Apparently, vicious political and public dissonance facilitates any inimical force like an adversarial state or terrorist organisation to take advantage, in any form. Political diversity and limited interest in national security until such time as an adverse event occurs is not conducive to India too. The situation as in Israel pre-October 7, 2023, must never be allowed to replicate. National security in all its manifestations needs a national accord.

Second, complacency is detrimental to security. Apparently, riding on its own strength and overconfidence, Israeli security forces and intelligence establishment had been complacent in manning the border and in effective and timely reaction to the assault across Gaza. India has had her share of complacency many a time in history which has led to serious situations. There is also a major concern about the 'battle of the turf' among various agencies due to the lack of an effective coordination mechanism. Complacency, hence can lead to war-like situations. It is also true that routines in the management of security become evident to the adversary, who can plan to take advantage at the place and time of its choosing. As is said, a terrorist has to succeed once, security and intelligence agencies, always. Being stuck in a routine, lack of dedicated coordination among various agencies and overconfidence in the security agencies would lead to oversights and mistakes which are easily avoidable. As was also clear, over-reliance on technology is not a shield from danger.

Third, there is the issue of treachery by adversaries. It is argued that any principled conception of concern of humanity and preservation of laws of war in good faith by adversaries is highly elusive and leads to unregulated violence. Perfidy and treachery are among the gravest in peacetime. For two years Hamas, by subterfuge, kept its dastardly plans under wraps and convinced Israel that it did not want a fight. A careful campaign of deception ensured Israel was caught off-guard when Hamas launched its devastating attack. All this while Israel was led to believe it was containing a war-weary Hamas by providing economic incentives to Gaza's workers. In fact, Fatah's statement of June 2022 accused Hamas leaders of fleeing to Arab capitals to live in "luxurious hotels and villas" leaving their people to suffer poverty in Gaza.

India too, has faced its share of treachery. Prime Minister Vajpayee was idolised as a sincere peacemaker when he undertook the bus to Lahore in February 1999, which was received by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the units of the Pakistan Army gave the Indian Prime Minister a guard of honour. All this while Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf was treacherously executing the plans to occupy the heights of Kargil that led to a bitter war from May to July in the same year. Similarly, after six agreements and a series of protocols on management of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a series of talks of the Principals and at ministerial levels over 25 years, China's People's Liberation Army's multiple and simultaneous incursions in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020 were akin to a strategic level of deception. India has to prepare for treachery, and attempts at deception.

Fourth, the methods of war initiation and consequent conduct are endless. Wars are also evolutionary and hence messy affairs where outcomes are unpredictable. Studying the wars of today, in Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and Gaza, one major transformation

visible is the participation of non-state forces as combatants in conventional wars. These non-state actors come with credible firepower, weaponry, technological assets and intelligence capabilities, and use sophisticated and even brutal operational tactics (such as the use of paragliders). These non-state actors may fight directly or indirectly, even with modern warfare techniques of cyber-warfare, targeted killings, covert or overt operations, proxy battles and propaganda. Psychological warfare through social media platforms has dangerously increased.

Wars are avoidable, but their existence is a bitter truth, and their unpredictability is also granted. There is also a need to examine warfare in dense urban surroundings with a considerable civilian population unwilling or unable to relocate. This civilian population also becomes a kind of 'human shield.' Of late, urban settings in Mosul, Fallujah, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Rakka, in Libya and now in Gaza have witnessed intense warfare that included sustained massive bombing campaigns and ground operations. These have led to very large collateral damage. Wars in the urban environment involve very difficult operations that need detailed analysis and preparation.

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Fifth, deterrence is dead. Deterrence, as an attempt to discourage potential perpetrators by influencing their assessment of costs relative to potential gains, cannot assure peace. Uppsala University's Conflict Data Programme of 2022 shows globally 238,812 deaths in conflicts, of which 205,158 are clubbed under 'State-based Violence.' The large Russian war machine and one of the best defence forces, IDF, could not deter wars in Ukraine or in Gaza.

In India, the concept of deterrence, punitive/dissuasive, is dominant, and is considered important to develop necessary strategic and operational capabilities. Deterrence can break down, due to the inability to communicate to the adversary, availability of powerful offensive retributive capability, and the will to use the capability of crossing red-lines or boundaries considered unacceptable. Neither deterrence by punishment against one by threat of imposing consequences, nor deterrence by denial as a defensive block against another, would eventually help. Hence, with deterrence prone to failure, efficacy of confidence building measures becomes questionable and the intent of adversaries dubious. With aggressive manoeuvrings in peacetime, the Government and the land forces in India do not have the luxury of easing off on defensibility of disputed borders.

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Sixth, the lines between peace and war have been blurred into irrelevance. Israel was deeming itself to be in a peace time. The cliché 'no war, no peace' hereafter does not restrict to counter-insurgency or counter terrorism; it is relevant through the continuum of threat-challenges in peace as much as war. Peace then is actually a period of preparation for conventional war, as also checking the bloodless wars that target the nation, executed by the adversaries in peacetime. In peace, as in wars, nearly everything can be weaponised. It could be destruction of Nord Stream 2, the Kerch Bridge, the power sector in Ukraine, a dam on Dnipro River, infrastructure in ports, a terror attack on a rave party on the border of Israel and Gaza. It also includes unprecedented sanctions that froze over USD 300 billion of Russia's gold and foreign currency reserves held in Europe and the US, and banned access to the global banking transaction network SWIFT. There are also trade wars, as Australia felt in November 2021 when China stopped wine imports. Of intelligence wars, they never get declared, nor do they end. India, in peace, hence remains in a state of challenges, undeclared and unending.

Conclusion

Wars are not inevitable; but they have always been there, and may be thrust upon us unpredictably. Leo Tolstoy wrote in *War and Peace* that war is an inherent part of human nature and humanity will never completely get rid of it. The kind of warfare taking place aims to create ambiguities that render decision-making very difficult. In this ambiguous environment, various individual war-fighting domains in India — the land, sea, air, cyber, electro-magnetic spectrum, space and informational — deem themselves to be separately and parochially, end-all. Each domain is critical to warfare, though not as much individually as conjointly.

In sum, it is essential also for India to take cognisance of the systemic of deliberate illusions and deception of peace created by Hamas under intense operational security that were followed by the grave assault. Such deliberate illusions of peace lead to lulling the system into complacency. India has had to face very costly surprises — Kargil, Mumbai (26/11) and Eastern Ladakh (May 2020). It is not possible to prognosticate exactly the typology, the time and scale of threat posed by adversaries. This could be in domains as far and wide as non-attributable cognitive warfare, disinformation, economic and military coercion, information warfare, or the realms of conventional warfare. Hence, it becomes necessary to have a newer paradigm of civil-military fusion for creating policy and strategy. India also must hone up her skills in creating a low-threshold detection system that allows the political hierarchy a very wide repertoire of response options.