



**Center for
Research &
Security
Studies**

Rule of Law - Security - Governance

Middle East Conflict

Evolving Geopolitical Dynamics

BACKGROUND

The Israel-Hamas conflict not only imposes greater adversity on Palestinians but also casts ominous shadows and carries far-reaching implications for the entire region and beyond, both in the present and the future. According to the World Bank's recent Commodity Markets Outlook report, continued escalation in hostilities, depending on the duration and scale, could lead to unprecedented challenges in the world's commodity markets, potentially causing a global oil crisis.

While the West consistently offers unwavering support to Israel, providing both financial and military aid, it vehemently opposes Russia for alleged indiscriminate civilian killings in Ukraine. A similarly striking paradox emerges as the Western world refrains from expressing significant opposition to India's annexation of Kashmir.

As the world witnesses the duplicity and partiality of the key decision-makers in such conflicts, the underlying and anticipated geopolitical landscape is characterized by contradictions that not only affect the immediate affectees in the conflicts but also reverberate globally, further complicating the fiscal and political quagmire.

This becomes relevant and viable in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict too. Hence, its visibly horrendous damages and the projected aftermath call for an impartial and intersectional discourse centered on exploring pragmatic and sustainable solutions to peace.

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) convened a roundtable on the "Middle East Conflict: Evolving Geopolitical Dynamics" in Islamabad on November 15, 2023. Participants, including diplomats, scholars, policy experts, and civil-military professionals, critically assessed the response from the Arab and Muslim world, the economic and regional security implications of the conflict, roles played by global powers such as the United States and China, and potential pathways toward conflict resolution. The primary notion that echoed at the roundtable was that the latest conflict in the Middle East has exposed the hypocrisy and moral corrosion of countries fuelled by transactional and self-serving interests.

DISCUSSION

Ambassador (R) Tasneem Aslam



Former ambassador Tasneem Aslam underscored that the current turmoil in Gaza is not an abrupt event but rather a consequence of the "persistent humiliation, dehumanization, and marginalization of the Palestinians" in the West Bank and Gaza. She

asserted that these factors provoked Hamas to a level of desperation that led to retaliation.

She said that despite Egypt's warning about Hamas planning something, the Israeli leadership was not on high alert, enabling the catastrophe to occur.

Characterizing this conflict as a turning point in global politics, Aslam noted, "It is no longer just Arabs and Muslims vs Israelis and Jews. This war resonates with African Americans, Latinos, the enlightened generation of Jews living abroad, and all those groups who have faced decades-long persecution and injustice."

She highlighted the widespread global support for Palestine, which is undermining the dominant power and credibility of the U.S. in the world. Highlighting how America's pro-Israel stance has caused grave damage to U.S. foreign policy, she added that the U.S. has not benefited from Biden's use of the Palestinian atrocity narrative to justify attacks on hospitals. "The Biden administration faced objections from the U.S. Senate, the State Department, and several agencies, as well as significant opposition from within the Democratic Party", she said.

Consequently, Aslam argued that the Israel-Hamas War has discredited the U.S./Western narrative on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. She concluded that this war, aimed at the systematic elimination of Palestinians from their homeland, will lead to greater instability in the Middle East, severely impacting countries like Egypt and others.

Air Vice Marshal (R) Shahzad Chaudhry

Air Vice Marshal (R) and Political, Security Analyst, Shahzad Chaudhry, hypothesized why Gaza has taken such a central place in the context of geopolitics. He stated, "The shift in U.S. foreign policy has resulted from

the country's key focus on reinforcing its alliance with Israel and NATO – these are the most critical interests of U.S. foreign policy.”



He said that while restricting Russia is not a problem for the U.S. as it can't unilaterally disturb the global balance and is still behind China in the global arena, constraining China through alternative means is of utmost importance for the U.S (and that is possible only if the U.S. reinforces its sway in the regions where China is making strides, consequently undermining American influence).

He added, “The U.S. also has some tertiary interests, such as pursuing outsourcing duties to other countries in the world, where Israel is of significant value as it has taken the initiative to maintain relations with Muslim nations. The realization that Saudi Arabia is the center of gravity and that other Muslim countries should follow suit depends on Israel's relationship with Saudi Arabia. For this breakthrough to occur - whereby Muslim nations decide to emulate Saudi Arabia - Israel can then have the leeway to assert its military and economic dominance.”

Given the complexity of the crisis and the involvement of multiple stakeholders that are shaping the dynamics of this conflict, he emphasized, “There is a dire need for a two-state solution to prevent the deterioration of the humanitarian crisis and ensure long-lasting peace. Key figures, including Biden, Netanyahu, and the Palestinian leadership could pave the way for peace through such an agreement. In that manner, we will have peace handed over to the world by a small but

powerful group of rational leaders. To materialize such a solution, world leaders must believe in peace and play a much-needed role in putting an end to this conflict rather than justifying the loss of innocent lives.”, he proposed.

Ambassador (R) Riffat Masood



Riffat Masood, Pakistan's former ambassador to Iran, emphasized the overlooked significance of Iran in the international community's understanding of the region. “The world must look at and understand this conflict in the context of Iran-US rivalry. Their

historical role necessitates their inclusion and active role in the discourse for the peaceful resolution of this conflict”, she said.

Masood pointed out the need to view the Gaza conflict in light of the shifting alignment of some Gulf states towards Israel. “The involvement of Russia and China in the Middle East, posing a threat to U.S. influence in the region, has added another layer of complexity to the conflict”, she added.

She underscored that what Israel has started in Gaza will not end there. Instead, it is part of a bigger plan. Israel’s main target is neither Palestine nor any other Middle Eastern country, but Iran. “Unless they (Israel and the US) can subjugate or cripple Iran, the conflict won't cease”. She

added that eliminating Hamas would not be an easy task as Iran provides full support to the group.

Masood urged modern democracies, particularly in the West, not to align themselves with expansionist and colonizing powers. “This is a decisive moment - history will remember whether they aligned with might or prioritized logic and humanitarianism”, she concluded.

Haroon Sharif



Mr. Haroon Sharif, former Minister of State, former Chairman of the Board of Investment, and former Regional Advisor to the World Bank Group, focused on the shift of the Arab world from geopolitics to geoeconomics.

He stated that the self-serving economic and political interests have blinded the conscience of the countries including the ones most proximate to the conflict. These short-term transactional commercial interests have triumphed over the morality and rationality of the leadership of most of them to adopt a unified stance. Such approaches, he emphasized, are bound to affect countries’ stance on issues affecting their immediate neighbors, as national interests and economic ambitions have become more important.

Sharif also discussed how the traditional historical relations among Arabs in the region have become subservient to commercial deals. Specifically,

he pointed out that Israel's influence over several Emirates and Saudi businesses has significantly increased through massive commercial deals. He expressed that this commercial dynamic has led to the UAE's response being practically non-existent in the Middle East conflict, emphasizing that their reaction is now dominated by medium-term commercial deals already agreed upon in the region.

In examining China's role in the current scenario, Sharif emphasized, "China's engagement, although transactional, reflects a moderate and long-term outlook on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partner countries, showcasing a balanced approach towards events in the Middle East." While some in the Arab world view China as a "long-term technology partner" with the potential for a separation from the U.S. over the next two decades, there are also concerns that China might occupy their assets.

Despite these varying opinions, Sharif concluded that China has a clear and robust stance on the Middle East crisis. "It is of the view that aggression should stop, and there should be a ceasefire. This underscores China's commitment not only to long-term economic partnerships but also to peaceful diplomatic solutions, including endorsing a two-state resolution and calling for an end to hostilities.", he concluded.

Lt. Gen (R) Asif Yasin Malik

Lt. Gen (R) Asif Yasin Malik emphasized the detrimental impact of internal divisions among Muslim and Arab nations and questioned the minimal concern demonstrated by immediate stakeholders on the issue.

"How could the far-affected be upset if the people directly affected aren't?", he said.



Criticizing the role of peace bodies in resolving the conflict for their casual approach and lack of strategic foresight, he pointed out that Palestine holds minimal significance on their agenda. "For resolution, we have been looking in the wrong place—the UN. It (Palestine) hasn't been a significant issue there for the last 70 years, and no

concrete solution has been reached, primarily due to the UN's debating culture", he added.

Concerning Pakistan's role in deciphering and mediating the dispute, he said, "Pakistan needs to develop and invest in dedicated academic expertise in the Middle East to organically understand and help address the complexities of such crises. Currently, we lack the intellectual depth and understanding, which is why the Middle East crisis has never seen a focused policy stance by Pakistan's policymakers."

Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal

Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, professor and the Head of the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) at the Quaid-i-Azam University, stated

that when the state decides to go for the genocide of the adversary within the state, then nobody cares. He cited the cases of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Kashmiris in India, and the Palestinians as examples. Referring to Israel's historical and questionable role in supporting Hamas, he said, "Since Hamas has geo-strategic significance, Israel is serving their interests of gaining territory and settlements in this situation."



He highlighted that the massive public support for Palestinians witnessed in the West following the latest conflict in the Middle East, indicates how public opinion – believed to be one of the core determinants of

foreign policy decisions – has “failed to influence the Western, democratically elected governments” as the West is still openly supporting Israel.

He underlined that the Middle Eastern governments are unable to resolve their interests without assistance from the United States.

He added that the U.S. is working to rebuild its influence in the Middle East by forging alliances and partnerships – to counter the expanding influence of China in the region.

Applauding China's constructive approach, he said, “The Chinese Policy is, nevertheless, extremely explicit. Since China believes that a two-state solution is the only viable solution to settle the Palestine-Israel conflict,

it plays the role of a global peacemaker here. China's Global Security Initiative paper, for example, makes reference to the Middle East and a two-state solution."

He concluded that despite the noticeable public outcry for Palestine on social media, the physical protests within Pakistan are not as pronounced as observed in the past.

Dr. Muhammad Ali Ehsan

Dr. Muhammad Ali Ehsan, a postdoctoral scholar at the International Affairs Department of Kazan Federal University in Russia, underscored a common thread in global crises, linking the Palestine-Israel War to the Ukraine-Russia War, attributing them all to provocation. He noted that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has taken no concrete action regarding the Palestine issue, limiting its response to denouncing the attacks without reaching any consensus.

Dr. Ehsan emphasized, "The core issue lies in leadership, asserting that a solution is elusive unless there is a fundamental change in leadership in Israel, Palestine, and the U.S., as the collective interest should be in ending the ongoing conflicts."

Addressing Pakistan's stance on the turmoil and seconding fellow speaker Asif Yasin Malik, he identified a significant flaw - insufficient expertise on the Middle East. He urged stakeholders to invest in scholars, teachers, and experts at both formal education and foreign policy levels. "On-ground and critical academic interventions are crucial to comprehending and effectively addressing the intricate complexities of such crises.", he concluded.

Ambassador (R) Qazi Humayun



The discussion was chaired by former ambassador Qazi Humayun, who served as both the Former Director General of Afghanistan at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to Afghanistan. He underscored how the Middle East crisis has sent shockwaves, profoundly affecting the entire world. Whether this crisis was orchestrated by Israel to eliminate Hamas or had intrinsic roots, innocent Palestinians are paying a substantial price. Expressing disappointment with the responses from the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), he emphasized that they should have been more proactive in the resolution of this conflict.

CONCLUSION

The forum cohesively stressed the indispensable roles of influential actors, notably the United States and China, in proactively addressing the Middle East conflict, fostering a climate for constructive dialogue and reconciliation, and encouraging both conflicting parties to engage in diplomatic efforts.

Highlighting the potential ramifications of the Biden administration and its allies' current alignment with Israel, participants shed light on the consequential damage to the global standing of the U.S. and EU. The substantial opposition to U.S. policy, a rarity in recent times, mirrors the sentiments within the EU, where public pressure and divisions in legislative bodies call for an urgent ceasefire.



In proposing a way forward, the forum emphasized the need for a recalibration of foreign policy decisions, urging the U.S. and EU to adopt more inclusive approaches. They advocated for a renewed commitment to diplomatic solutions, considering the widespread need and support for an immediate ceasefire. This collective call for a more diplomatic, inclusive, and peace-oriented approach signifies a potential pathway forward for resolving the complexities of the Middle East conflict.