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ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR AND CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST: FUTURE OF THE PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD

Abstract

Attacks against Israel by Palestinian armed militia group Hamas on 7th October 2023 ignited a gory war between the two parties. Several reasons worked behind its outbreak. It is now running for about six months¹ and Israel is laying everything to waste in Gaza. Ceasefire attempts failed and both sides are adamant on eliminating each other. The Middle East's position in global affairs means any event here will have global repercussions and this war is no exception. It is and will be impacting Middle Eastern geopolitics in a variety of manners: Israel's invincibility myth debunked, restoring the importance of Israel-Palestine conflict, Arab-Israel normalisation stalled, humanitarian catastrophe and ensuing refugee crisis, energy markets upheaval, reemergence of big power rivalry, possibility of conflict spillover into neighbours, etc. Extra-regional actors and factors have always influenced this region's affairs to a considerable extent. The article reveals that, the role played by outside actors like the US and the European Union (EU) in this war will have significant impacts on the prospects of Palestinian statehood, while they remain steadfast in backing Israel. There have grown considerable divisions in those regions and they are facing other challenges themselves, which indicate lesser sympathy, and will further jeopardise the cause.

Keywords: Middle East, Israel, Palestine, Hamas, Geopolitics, Gulf Nations, Statehood, Iran, External Actors

1. Introduction

Since its creation in 1948, Israel has regularly been in conflict with its neighbours. The Arab-Israel Wars are evidence of that fact. However, its continuing

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¹ Discussion in the article covers the events occurring up to March 2024.

occupation and maltreatment of Palestinians have led also to conflict with non-state actors, e.g., Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Al Qassam Brigades (Hamas' military wing), etc. Israel fought a major war with the Shia militia group Hezbollah (of Lebanon) in 2008. Afterwards, sporadic violence between the two sides went on. On 7th October 2023, Hamas² unleashed a surprise attack on a music festival in southern Israel; the date also coincided with a Jewish holiday and a day after 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War's start (6th October 1973). These attacks did not come as a total surprise for Israel, albeit an event like this is quite unthinkable given the country's superior intelligence networks and vast surveillance measures; it had prior information of that long before the attacks actually took place.³ Furthermore, Egypt⁴ and the US had warned them of potential attacks earlier. Over 1,200 Israeli people died initially, many were wounded and several were taken hostage by Hamas. The dead include civilians, military and security personnel. Israeli response has been aggressive as usual with the launching of a massive military campaign against Hamas and their allies. The campaign goes on despite a temporary truce and as of March 2024, claimed over 32,705 Palestinian⁵ lives alongside inflicting massive damage to the Palestinian economy. A humanitarian disaster is taking place since most infrastructures have been demolished and further escalation with grave consequences have been warned off by various groups including the United Nations (UN).

Israel's violence against Palestinian people and with armed militia groups is nothing new. Besides, there have been attempts at peace involving both parties, regional and external actors, but for various reasons and circumstances, all proved futile eventually. A notable recent step was the normalisation initiative between Israel and some Arab nations since mid-2017, brokered by the US. Bahrain and the UAE went ahead in expanding ties and cooperation with Israel in a number of sectors. Saudi Arabia allowed its airspace to be used for Israeli flights. But after this current war erupting and raging on violently, the endeavour and associated prospects are in profound uncertainty; another vital issue pushed into similar jeopardy is the question of Palestinian statehood.

The Middle East retains a very crucial place in global affairs for millennia on various grounds: religious, political, strategic-military, economic and so on. All

² There are competing views regarding the nature of Hamas as a grouping. For a detail discussion, see subsection 2.2 of the article.

³ Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, "Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2023.

⁴ Olivia Land, "Egypt Warned Israel Days Before Hamas Attack," *The New York Post*, October 12, 2023.

⁵ "Gaza to Receive Desperately Needed Food Aid in the Coming Days by Ship as Death Toll Rises," *CNN*, March 30, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-30-24/index.html>.

major powers have tried for maintaining their respective dominance/control over this region. Hence, it is not unusual that any event here will have global repercussions. During the Cold War era, it was a major ground for exercise of influence by both the US and the USSR. The USSR's demise left Russia not in a position to continue that role while the US and its allies came to freely wield theirs here. Currently, the US is the main external actor. However, that status is gradually coming under challenge. For example, Russia and China are increasing their presence in the Middle East. Russian foray into the region mainly focuses on arms trade and business ties; being a top energy resource exporter, its role has grown significantly with time. China so far, has not sought a military presence but concentrating on expanding business. The US has further challenges, namely Iran (in particular, the nuclear agreement), Syria, Yemen (civil wars), non-state entities which pose substantial threats to its regional allies (Israel, Gulf monarchies), etc. In addition, North Africa has emerged as a severe headache for Europe. Nonstop illegal migration to Europe amid an economic slump, simultaneous rise, growth and spread of right-wing populism, and the Russo-Ukrainian War—all are producing complex scenarios. On top of these, the current Israel-Hamas war is bringing in more difficulties. There are even speculations that this war may spill over into neighbouring nations and regions, as some others are becoming overtly or covertly involved. If that occurs, Middle Eastern geopolitics will be considerably impacted.

Against such backdrop, some questions naturally come up: how did the current Israel-Hamas war erupt? How have other countries and organisations (regional and extra-regional) reacted about it so far? What possible impacts may that have on Middle Eastern geopolitics and prospects of Palestinian statehood/a sovereign Palestinian state?

This paper is an endeavour to provide some insights into such queries. It is a qualitative work, and relies on books, journals, policy papers, newspaper articles, and online sources. It has five sections. After the introduction, the second section contains methodology, literature review and probable factors leading up to the ongoing war. Third section discusses the ongoing war and how it may impact regional geopolitics. The fourth section analyses the implications of the ongoing war on Palestinian statehood potentials. Fifth section concludes this paper. Here, main argument is, both the regional geopolitics and the potential for Palestinian statehood will be substantially affected, given the conflict's gory nature, complications it already has created and the emergence of new challenges.

2. Methodology

To keep discussions relevant and precise, the paper's main focus will remain on countries of the Gulf region/Western Asia; North Africa constitutes Middle East, but except for Egypt, other states there will be brought in fairly small proportions because their responses have not been as manifested as of those in the Gulf; furthermore, due to lacking closer propinquity to Israel unlike that of Egypt, the crisis is not likely to have immediate impacts on them. Although illegal migration from these countries continues to be another major headache for Europe, that has other connotations. The war is going on in full force and references have not been available so far in academic sources; hence, this paper uses mainly news sites and newspapers in later parts. Groups like Hamas or Hezbollah have been used in both singular and plural forms. Discussions over issues stated in the article do not also go beyond March 2024.

2.1 Literature Review

There are numerous works on the Israel-Palestine conflict focusing on its various phases, dimensions and aspects. Nonetheless, works specifically discussing Middle Eastern geopolitics are not that easily or readily available in comparison. This paper evaluates several relevant works on all three issues mentioned in the title; it starts with Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Bülent Aras & Şaban Kardaş in their paper (2021) discuss changes in the region including North Africa's security atmosphere resulting from cycles of insecurity and instability, putting considerable emphasis on the Arab Spring and its aftermath. As their title suggests, role, and strategies of different powers for engaging with the region and how they are changing those, have been well discussed: these include the US, EU, Russia, China, Iran, and Türkiye. A notable feature is citing perspectives of Russian, Chinese, and Iranian scholars, which increases the objectivity of their work.⁶ Sverre Lodgaard (2023)⁷ speaks on how the US is downsizing its military bases and facilities in the Middle East, under three presidents: Obama, Trump, and now, Biden, how this initiative is driving countries like Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to seek new and greater partnership with Russia and China. The paper talks about a new evolving triangle, i.e., China-Saudi Arabia-

⁶ Bülent Aras & Şaban Kardaş, "Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (February 2021): 397-402.

⁷ Sverre Lodgaard, "The Geopolitics of the Middle East," *Toda Policy Brief*, no. 155, March 2023, 01-06.

Russia; another triangle is China-Russia-Iran. It also discusses geopolitical shifts involving small and medium states in the region at length in relation to US military presence. Theo Francken's report⁸ explains the Middle East's constant pertinence for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in light of Iran's role in the region. He also speaks on how Iran's internal matters are posing multifarious challenges to different states, mainly Israel, the country's involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war in support of Russia and the war's impact on the region, Arab-Israel normalisation, growing involvement of Russia and China here, etc., in detail. One of his arguments is, how Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape may change under the impacts of tortuous equations emanating from these phenomena. Nevertheless, his analysis seems to portray Iran in a broadly negative light.

As the Israel-Hamas War is going on, works are coming in about the conflict; most of them are reports by different organisations. The British House of Commons briefing, for example, provides details of response and position taken by Britain and others in this war. It brings in reactions by British politicians, both in the government and opposition, almost all of whom have called for tougher measures on Hamas and their main backer, Iran.⁹ Bernard Siman stresses conflict resolution rather than management for the EU in which they failed miserably. He adds, that Netanyahu's measures of incentives to Hamas could not alter their aim of eradicating Israel, nor the ideological orthodoxy, which the leader ignored as well. He urges the EU to have a major role in stabilisation of Gaza once Israel completes the ground assault.¹⁰ S&P Global Ratings mainly focuses on current and future economic turmoil due to this war in their report. They, however, assume the war will remain limited within Israel and Gaza, but there can be limited spillover impacts on other states. The report also says question of Palestinian statehood regained centre stage.¹¹ Reports from the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) of October and November 2023 show how the war unfolded, response by Israel and the US, what impacts it may have on involved parties, and policy options for the US. One common thing in these works is, they hardly condemn Israeli policies towards Palestinians.

⁸ Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM), *Shifting Geopolitics in Iran and the Gulf* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2023).

⁹ House of Commons, *Israel-Hamas Conflict: UK and International Response* (London: House of Commons Library, 2023).

¹⁰ Bernard Siman, "Rethinking Geopolitical Strategies: from Conflict Management to Conflict Resolution in the Middle East," *Egmont Policy Brief*, no. 321, November 2023, 01-05.

¹¹ Standard and Poor's, *War In Middle East Compounds Global Geopolitical Risks* (New York: Standard and Poor's Financial Services LLC, 2023), https://www.spglobal.com/_assets/documents/ratings/research/101587785.pdf.

Last is the issue of Palestinian statehood on which numbers of works are available. Padraig O'Malley (2017) presents a pessimistic view of the two-state solution which he says is unachievable. He attributed this to changing geopolitical scenarios in the Middle East, e.g., the Gaza War of 2014, growth of Muslim militancy after the Arab Spring's failure, the Syrian Civil War, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Trump administration's reluctance.¹² Dana H. Allin shares similar view in his work (2023), stating the 7th October attack announced the demise of a two-state solution; although he blames Hamas largely for ruining the prospect, there is also contempt for Israeli settlers and their rightwing supporters in the US. His use of historical analogies between the 1973 Arab-Israel War and the current Israel-Hamas war offers valuable insights into what possibility the two-state solution/Palestinian statehood holds.¹³ Merav Amir (2021) presents a different and interesting opinion on the subject. She argues Israel is asserting its regional domination by distancing itself from settler colonialism and keeping up expansionism in the West Bank, consequently destroying prospects of the two-state solution and a sovereign Palestine.¹⁴ According to Chuck Freilich (2023), total annihilation of Hamas may not be feasible, nonetheless, stands as a precondition for reviving the two-state solution, since he believes it is not still dead. He, however, also blames settler policies of right-wing administrations in Israel for leading to Palestinians' rejection of peace proposals and poses doubts about the Palestine Liberation Army's (PLA) capacity to govern West Bank.¹⁵

Brief analysis above shows there is lack of academic works discussing Middle Eastern geopolitics in relation to this war, how it and prospects of a Palestinian state may be impacted by that. Again, with the war entering its fifth month, no end in sight and assuming complicated, gory character every day, this paper will be among those few attempts to address such issues.

¹² Padraig O'Malley, "Israel and Palestine: The Demise of the Two-state Solution," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29, no. 1 (2017): 01-05.

¹³ Dana H. Allin, "Applying History: Gaza and the Twentieth Century," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 65, no. 6 (December 2023-January 2024): 224-229.

¹⁴ Merav Amir, "Post-occupation Gaza: Israel's War on Palestinian Futures," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 103, no. 4 (2021): 294-295.

¹⁵ Chuck Freilich, "Israel and the Palestinians: The Day After," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 65, no. 6 (December 2023-January 2024): 68-70.

2.2 *Who are Hamas?*

Hamas is a Sunni Muslim, armed paramilitary and political organisation who governs Gaza. Their Arabic name is Ḥarakah al Muqāwamah al Islāmiyyah (HAMAS), which means Islamic Resistance Movement.¹⁶ They propagate Palestinian nationalism with focus on Islam. The group was founded in December 1987 as an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood but later separated from them. Hamas has a military wing, the Izz al din al Qassam Brigades (headed by Mohammad Deif), and a political wing (Ismail Haniyeh). In 1988, they came out with a charter which outlined their ideology and motives: armed struggle against Jews, destruction of Israel, and establish a Palestinian state in its place. Their strong emphasis on religion distinguishes them from the more secular Fatah, who governs the West Bank. These two have been in conflict since 2006 when Hamas won the Palestinian legislative election in Gaza after Israel withdrew. They have had a number of military engagements with Israel. First was in 1989, when they joined the First Intifada. Then came the Second Intifada (2000-2005), the 2008-09 Gaza War, the 2014 Gaza War and now the ongoing war since 2023. Meanwhile, sporadic clashes with Israeli security forces and settlers have continued. Several countries and groups are supportive of Hamas, namely, Iran (allegedly principal sponsor with funds, arms and logistics), Venezuela, North Korea, Qatar, Afghanistan, Algeria, Turkiye (to some extent), Syria, etc. Conversely, the US, the UK, EU, Canada, Israel, and Japan designate them as a terrorist entity. Among non-state groups, the Hezbollah, Houthis/Ansar Allah (Yemen), Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Popular Mobilisation Forces (Iraq) and a number of others support Hamas. In spite of ideological divisions, Sunni Hamas receives wide-ranging help from Shia Iran, Hezbollah, Houthis, and the PFLP (Leninist-Marxist, socialist). Unlike most Western countries, Russia, China, and the UN do not consider or label Hamas as terrorists. In the first charter of 1988, Hamas said their struggle was against Jews, but the 2017 charter differentiates between Jews and Zionism. It says the group is waging and will keep up its battle against Zionists, but not common Jews just because of their religious identity.¹⁷ This is a notable break from their earlier hardline stance.

¹⁶ Floor Janssen, *Hamas and Its Positions towards Israel: Understanding the Islamic Resistance Organization through the Concept of Framing* (Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, January 2009).

¹⁷ Khaled Hroub, "A Newer Hamas? The Revised Charter," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46, no. 4 (2017): 102.

2.3 *Israel-Hamas War 2023-Present: Background*

A conflict rarely breaks out overnight; instead, it builds up over time and varied causes. Same can be said of the latest Israel-Hamas War where diverse driving factors worked. Since Hamas came to control Gaza in 2006, they have engaged in intermittent clashes with Israeli forces. After their takeover, Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade on Gaza in 2007 which remains in place to this day, has proved debilitating for the region's economy very much and other sectors. Even before the present war began, the region suffered from soaring unemployment at 46.4 per cent.¹⁸ Up to 2022, its GDP had fallen by nearly 27 per cent.¹⁹ There is no seaport or airport, entry and exit are restricted by land, air, and sea. Gaza residents have to wait long for availing basic medical facilities; high child and maternal mortality rates are common. Israel defends the blockade citing security reasons. Hamas, on the other hand, cites this as a reason for launching the attacks.

Thousands of Palestinian prisoners remain detained in Israeli jails; they include women, children and people held without any charge. Aside from charges relating to terrorism (as viewed by Israel) or anti-Israeli/Jewish statements, actions, some charges leading to incarceration are quite peculiar, for example, raising the Palestinian flag which cannot be done without permission from Israeli military authorities.²⁰ There is administrative detention, where a person although not proven guilty, can be pre-emptively arrested by security agencies merely on suspicion of committing a crime at a later time. In addition, allegations of ruthless torture on prisoners by them are widespread. Prisoners undergo a variety of abuses, physical and mental alike. According to a Palestinian NGO, more than one million Palestinians have been arrested since Israel captured Gaza in 1967 from Egypt. They also allege that Israeli authorities keep on such vicious practices with full freedom, knowing they will not be held accountable.²¹ Hamas continuously has demanded release of prisoners from Israeli custody. After the war began and then the temporary truce

¹⁸ International Labour Organisation (ILO), "Impact of the Israel-Hamas Conflict on the Labour Market and Livelihoods in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," *ILO Brief*, November 2023, https://webapps.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_901136.pdf.

¹⁹ Oxfam, *Right to Live Without a Blockade* (Oxford: Oxfam, June 2022), https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-06/Right%20to%20Live%20Without%20Blockade_June%202022.pdf.

²⁰ Law for Palestine, *Israel's Arrest Policy against Palestinian Students* (Manchester: Law for Palestine, 2023), <https://law4palestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Law-for-Palestine-Report.-Israels-Arrest-Policy-against-Palestinian-University-Students-in-the-West-Bank-and-Israel-.pdf>.

²¹ The Palestinian Initiatives for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, *Israeli Torture of Palestinian Prisoners: Systematic Cruelty in a Climate of Total Impunity* (Ramallah: MIFTAH, 2022).

was enacted, it was one of their demands which was met through release of hostages taken.

Violence against Palestinians, intrusion into, and forceful occupation of their properties by Israeli settlers and their supporters have worked as other triggers. Like torture on prisoners mentioned just above, these crimes are seldom, if ever at all, punished under Israeli legal system and instead, are justified by Israeli state authorities, again, on security grounds. Acts of violence include: blocking roads, hurling stones at houses and vehicles, raids on farmlands and villages, destroying agriculture (especially olive fields), physical attacks, verbal abuse and murders.²² These settlers' numbers reached around 700,000 by February 2023.²³ Settlements have seen substantial growth under Netanyahu, albeit there is strong opposition within Israel itself about this. Hamas has opposed vehemently to these people, their land grabbing, eviction and other types of maltreatment of Palestinians. In August 2023, it strongly condemned expansion of Israeli settlements.²⁴

Religious dispute is a component behind the attacks which is also present in the broader Israel-Palestine conflict. Hamas alleged that the Jews desecrated the contested worshipping site, Al-Aqsa Mosque, that is equally holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Israel captured this site (which is in the Old City) after the 1967 War alongside East Jerusalem. The mosque has long been a point of contention between and among these communities, particularly between Jews and Muslims. In recent times, tensions have been intense, often leading to violent clashes: the May 2021 riots between Israeli security forces and Palestinian armed groups, the May 2022 clashes involving Israeli Police and Palestinians in the mosque compound, and latest, April 2023 violence between these two. Albeit Jews have right of worship there too (near the Western Wall), according to Hamas and other similar groups fighting Israel, these are desecration of the holy site when Israeli security forces and Jewish settlers stormed the mosque premises; they responded by firing rockets towards Israel from Gaza. When the attacks on 7th October (Operation Al-Aqsa Flood) were launched with firing thousands of rockets in a very short span of time, Hamas' military wing chief delivered an audio message, saying this was for avenging the sacrilege, deaths

²² Mais Qandeel, "Violence and State Attribution: The Case of Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 52, no. 2 (2023): 45.

²³ Yoav Shemer Kunz, "Annexation, Normalization and the Two-state Solution in Israel-Palestine," *Frontiers in Political Science*, no. 5, 2023.

²⁴ "Hamas Condemns Israel's 'Colonial Settler Expansion,'" *Middle East Monitor*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230817-hamas-condemns-israels-colonial-settler-expansion>.

of Palestinians at the hands of Israeli forces and Jewish settlers; he even called upon all Muslims to launch attacks on Israel.²⁵

Premier Benjamin Netanyahu and his policies have been blamed for allowing Hamas in launching this war. He has been in power for total of 16 years and criticised for growth of Hamas' power and control over Gaza, while weakening the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank. One allegation has been issuance of work permits to Gazan workers for working in Israel where salaries are much higher. With his return to power in December 2022, these permits increased substantially in numbers. His government conducted indirect negotiations with the militia group through Egypt.²⁶ Former premier Ehud Olmert accused Netanyahu of using Hamas in undermining the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.²⁷ It is thought that Hamas was trying to subvert the Arab-Israel normalisation as well, especially with Saudi Arabia.

3. Israel-Hamas War 2023 and Changing Geopolitics of the Middle East

The current war has generated shockwaves throughout the Middle East, Israel and Palestine included. Moreover, others will probably not remain immune to its impacts due to the Middle East's importance in regional and global affairs. After the ISIL's fall and the Arab-Israel rapprochement started, it was thought that the region would see some level of stability and peace. With the Russo-Ukrainian War's emergence and continuation, the Israel-Palestine conflict seemed thus to be neglected by regional and extra-regional actors, but the war has changed that notion.

This war debunked the myth of Israeli invincibility once more. First was the 1973 Yom Kippur War and second, the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2008. Hamas not only attacked the music festival, but also went far deeper into Israeli controlled areas and kidnapped people from residences, taking them as hostages. Hence, other opponents (state and non-state) may feel encouraged to potential military confrontations with the country, overt or covert. Its harsh response drew severe criticism from different parties, including the UN, as the war has razed much of Gaza's infrastructure, resulted

²⁵ Bethan McKernan, "Israel and Hamas at War after Surprise Attacks from Gaza Strip," *The Guardian*, October 07, 2023.

²⁶ Tal Schneider, "For Years, Netanyahu Propped up Hamas. Now It's Blown up in our Faces," *The Times of Israel*, October 08, 2023.

²⁷ Eric Cortellessa, "Former Israeli Prime Minister: Israeli Endgame in Gaza should be a Palestinian State," *Time Magazine*, November 06, 2023.

in massive death tolls of Palestinian civilians,²⁸ displacement and additional fears of disease outbreaks.²⁹ Premier Netanyahu's popularity had visibly reduced prior to this war.³⁰ A series of protests began in 2020 which ran into 2023 (on various issues); he remains on trial for corruption charges too. Public attention may have shifted now to the war with growing support for the leader, but it should also be remembered, as Israeli journalist Amit Segal says, administrations in the country faced collapse after a major war: Golda Meir in 1973 (Yom Kippur War), Menachem Begin in 1982 (1st Lebanon War), and Ehud Olmert in 2008 (also called the 2nd Lebanon War).³¹ Many Jews do not identify with the Israeli state, or its policies, and rather, support Palestinians, but that could not prevent rising antisemitism in different countries, even among Israel's allies, after this war; this will certainly be disturbing for the Jewish state.

As the war involves nationalistic elements, it can be claimed that antisemitism will rise too. Israel carries on fighting Hamas in Gaza and the war so far has not spread much beyond its borders, that is, foreign parties have not set foot on Israeli soil, for either side. But at the same time, Hezbollah fired rockets into Israel and Yemen's Houthis openly threatened of attacking Israeli vessels in the Red Sea. Soon afterwards, they began to launch real attacks with UAVs, and missiles, including taking ships (of different countries) hostage. These infuriated the US and Britain who launched aerial counterattacks on Houthis and their sites in Yemen; nevertheless, some Arab allies expressed concerns about spread of instability, saying those insurgents might not be deterred. It seems they were not wrong, as Houthis likewise, warned of retaliation for these strikes.³² Several merchant ships have been attacked and one British ship has sunk. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not agree on joining the US-led Red Sea Task Force. Even if Israel wins inside its territory and succeeds in completely eliminating Hamas, there will still be these two and, other such groups may join them. This will push the country into fighting on more than one front. Does it have the capacity? For a certain time, Israel may go on, but not be sustainable for long run, not with allies' assistance either, due to various factors, e.g., resource crunch, Israel's small landmass, public opinion, risks of escalating further

²⁸ "Israel Presses Ahead in Battle against Hamas in Southern Gaza," *The Deccan Herald*, December 11, 2023.

²⁹ Peter Beaumont, "People will Die in the Streets': Gaza Dreads Onset of Winter as Disease Rises," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2023.

³⁰ Sarosh Bana, "Israel-Hamas War and Israeli Domestic Politics," *RSIS Commentary*, no. 159, November 03, 2023.

³¹ Peter Beaumont, "What would Israel Look Like under a New Leader and Who would Benefit?," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2023.

³² Eric Schmidt and Helene Cooper, "U.S. Missiles Strike Targets Linked to the Houthi Militia," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2024.

tensions, in a highly volatile, ever-sensitive Middle East. The country's diplomatic efforts of improving and expanding ties with Arab nations have to a large extent, been damaged, i.e., the Arab-Israel normalisation process. Jordan recalled its ambassador from Israel and the Israeli ambassador to Jordan would not be allowed in. Saudi Arabia called off discussions on normalisation with Israel.³³

Another sad reality has been the almost completely ineffective response from leading Muslim nations regarding Israel's atrocities on Gaza's civilians. It is true, many of them have condemned these actions, provided substantial amount of humanitarian aid for the people, urged for dialogues and political solutions, but response from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, etc., has to assume uniformity and strong form yet. After the war began, Saudi-Israel normalisation talks were halted, but with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's recent Middle East visit, there are claims those are to resume.³⁴ The UAE plans to retain ties with Israel. Bahrain called its ambassador back from Israel, but a Bahraini official emphasised that his country would uphold the Abraham Accords with the Jewish state.³⁵ At the Riyadh Summit in November 2023, their divisions of views were also evident although there were calls for stopping arms exports to Israel. Lately, Jordan launched a bombing campaign against suspected Iran-linked narcotics dealers in Syria. These hostilities, weaknesses, and failures can deeply dent their credibility and sincerity in solving regional crises.

Several Middle Eastern Muslim countries have cooperation agreements with the US and allies, including Israel, remain reliant on them, which bars them from taking strong stands or raising voice in protest; for example, Egypt and Jordan. Morocco is another case in this regard; its ability may be restrained because of the US-Morocco-Israel normalisation agreement signed in December 2020. The country is also a notable source of illegal immigration to Europe which has put it at loggerheads with several countries there. Tunisia meanwhile, imposed a travel ban on legal expert Chawki Tabib, who was going to represent Palestine at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).³⁶ Most states in this region are monarchies or autocracies. While common people may oppose better ties with Israel, their opinions hardly matter,

³³ "Saudi Pauses Talks on Normalisation with Israel," *The Business Standard*, October 14, 2023.

³⁴ Nadeen Ebrahim, "Saudi Arabia is not Ruling Out Befriending Israel. But It may Come at a Higher Price," *The Albany Herald*, January 15, 2024.

³⁵ Aaron Poris, "Bahrain-Israel Peace is Here to Stay Despite Gaza War, Senior Bahraini Envoy Says," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 15, 2023.

³⁶ "Tunisia Bans Lawyer Representing Palestine at the ICJ," *Middle East Monitor*, January 22, 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240122-tunisia-bans-lawyer-representing-palestine-at-the-icj/>.

adding more to these countries' bad reputation in crisis management. This can be seen in procedures of the case filed against Israel: it was launched by a non-Muslim country from Africa, some others are backing the initiative, but no Gulf state formally joined that. Other Muslim nations expressed sympathy and support for Palestinians while condemning Israel, but may not be able to do much other than providing aid, owing to geographical and other barriers.

Magnitude of humanitarian disaster taking place in Gaza has really been huge. Hospitals have been struck by missiles and bombs (in many cases deliberately, alleging Hamas or other militias were hiding there), which collapsed the already tattering health service system, rendering the people there with no access to healthcare at all; their plight prior to this war has been talked about earlier. Around 1.7 million people in Gaza have been displaced as of March 2024, of whom 1.1 million are facing starvation.³⁷ Shortages of food, fuel, water are severe, many relief agencies are running out of resources and capacity. A refugee crisis is brewing that can influence Middle Eastern and nearby regions' geopolitical scenarios to a great extent, especially as anti-refugee sentiments are on the rise worldwide. This concern is not baseless. Egypt opened the Rafah border crossing for delivery of humanitarian aid but is also afraid Israel's attacks may push Palestinians into Sinai.³⁸ It warned Israel and the US to not push them there.

Palestinians displaced earlier by Israel have been scattered across other countries, but very few want now to accept additional ones, not even the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) members. Netanyahu's administration, in spite of being labelled as a rightwing one, allowed Gazan workers in Israel. But that will most probably cease to exist from now, which will further deteriorate the region's economy; in early November, several thousand were sent back to Gaza. Out of desperation, if they try to reach Europe, which is struggling with the migrant crisis for almost a decade, will create another debacle, since economic slump and the Russo-Ukrainian War have already put the region into grave turmoil; many countries openly show resentment of refugees, asylum seekers and Ukrainians have faced similar situations. There is more: Israel is expanding its settlements unabated;

³⁷ UNSC, *UN Security Council Monthly Forecast* (United Nations Security Council, April 2024), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly_forecast/2024-04.

³⁸ Marc Español, "Egypt Alarmed by Israel's Forced Displacement of Gazans to the South," *El Pais*, December 12, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-12-12/egypt-alarmed-by-israels-forced-displacement-of-gazans-to-the-south.html>.

2023 was record year for these.³⁹ Shin Bet, the Israeli security agency, warned in late October that settler violence could lead up to catastrophe in the West Bank,⁴⁰ but the Netanyahu government seems to be not listening to these. Likewise waging violence on Palestinians, Jewish settlers are now using the tactic on Bedouins of Israel: driving them from their lands and occupying those.⁴¹ This practice has been running since Israel's foundation in 1948, when they were removed and sent near the Negev desert; it may be nothing unusual if these people take up arms against the state (and by extension, settlers) and that can culminate into ethnic conflict in the region. Unlike the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israel's mistreatment of Bedouins does not receive broader media attention. But if such an ethnic conflict indeed emerges between Israel and them, that will not remain limited merely to the Middle East; in light of the region's overall sensitive nature and severity of that possible event, there will be spillovers and involve more than regional actors.

In 2023, Iran and some Gulf nations began to improve their relations which had been damaged owing to longstanding mutual hostilities. Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed in March 2023, to resume bilateral ties and reopen their respective embassies in each other. But other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, namely Bahrain and UAE, went ahead for expansion of ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords. Bahrain recalled its ambassador from Israel, but UAE retains close ties with Israel albeit both nations condemned the Hamas attacks, death and kidnap of Israeli civilians. Iran may be putting efforts at improving ties, and the normalisation stalled after the war began, has not been totally abandoned; the country's disputes (e.g., proxy conflicts) with Sunni Muslim Gulf nations have not been resolved. Meanwhile, its support for Hamas sustains. There are Shia communities in these countries and groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis—all are of concern to them, for political, security and religious reasons. The war may have brought some sort of unity among them for the time being in relation to Palestinians' plight, but once the war will be over, there is no guarantee their mutual rivalry will not return, especially as Iran's critical views about the normalisation, Israel and Gulf states' common enmity towards it, opposition of the nuclear programme, and growth of its arms industry. The last factor may be accelerated at greater scale by Iran on security threats emanating from,

³⁹ Tani Goldstein, "2023 Sets Record for Settlement Construction and Outpost Legalization – Watchdog," *The Times of Israel*, August 08, 2023.

⁴⁰ "Shin Bet Said to Warn Settler Violence could Cause West Bank Eruption," *The Times of Israel*, October 30, 2023.

⁴¹ Emma Graham Harrison and Quique Kirszenbaum, "The Most Successful Land-grab' Strategy since 1967 as Settlers Push Bedouins of West Bank Territory," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2023.

its alliance and conspicuous assistance for Russia in the Ukraine war, continuous and currently growing presence of Western (US, Britain, and France) military in the wake of Israel-Hamas War (in solidarity with Israel) and safeguard their own interests.

Boycott of Israeli and Western companies have been a conspicuous feature. Several companies (like their governments) that expressed support for Israeli military campaign, saw growing calls for boycott of their products and services. US companies have been hit somewhat hard in some Arab nations. While this may help local businesses to some extent, the measure ultimately may not succeed for different reasons, e.g., Israel's economic resilience and innovation, wide-ranging business ties with Western and other nations, global stature/reach of Israeli, Jewish owned, pro-Israel companies, absence of viable alternatives, losses incurred by local franchisees-suppliers-agents-workers, etc. During 2003, there were similar boycotts, but could not stop the US invasion of Iraq. Similarly, Israel seems to go on with the war, regardless of massive economic tolls.⁴²

The war has rekindled major powers' interest in the Middle East and that will have profound impact on the Middle East's geopolitics. For some years, the US had largely been engrossed with shifting to Asia (the Indian Ocean in particular) from the Euro-Mediterranean domain; the Indo-Pacific Strategy is an outcome of efforts in that regard. But that focus has come back to the region. As the most important external player, the country has been prompt in condemning the Hamas attacks and providing emergency aid for Israel. In late October, it opposed a resolution (proposed by Jordan) at the UN General Assembly that would help enact a truce and allow aid for Gaza but failed in stopping the move from being passed.⁴³ In early November, US lawmakers approved US\$ 14 billion in military aid for Israel albeit that meant their country would need now to shoulder the burden.⁴⁴ Vice-president Kamala Harris said her country had no plan for involving in the war, but the US has indeed sent warships (including two aircraft carriers), soldiers and military planes to the Eastern Mediterranean. This is viewed as a measure to deter Iran and its other proxies (the informally touted Axis of Resistance) from having outright confrontation with Israel⁴⁵ or come in

⁴² Zachy Hennessey, "Israel to Amend Budget, Gaza War Direct Cost \$246 Million Daily," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 25, 2023.

⁴³ Patrick Wintour, "US Looks Isolated after Opposing UN Resolution of Gaza Truce," *The Guardian*, October 28, 2023.

⁴⁴ Jacob Bogage and Abigail Hauslohner, "House Passes \$14 Billion in Israel Aid with Costly Cuts to IRS," *The Washington Post*, November 02, 2023.

⁴⁵ Elise Vincent, "With Two Aircraft Carriers, the US Wants to Create a Naval Bubble around Israel," *Le Monde*, October 27, 2023.

aid of Hamas. Other allies of Israel, e.g., Britain (amid economic slowdown) and France have provided similar assistance, sending surveillance aircrafts and warships, although none of them has their troops on ground; only Israeli reservists flew back home from France to join the fight. On 12 December, the UN General Assembly passed another resolution for humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Here also, the US used its veto power although the proposal passed eventually.⁴⁶ These actions indicate and substantiate the fact again: whatever costs may the US and other Western nations have to bear, notwithstanding damage to credibility and contradicting their own policies, they will always stand unwaveringly by Israel. Another major power, Russia, who has been fighting in Ukraine since February 2022, has been cautious in reacting to the war. The country does not label Hamas as terrorists as said earlier. President Putin condemned the US for Hamas' attacks, not the group, stating these resulted from US' failed policies in the region. Besides Putin, other politicians from Russia have pointed at what they say, are the US and EU's double standards, i.e., Russia does not willingly target Ukrainian civilians but faces punitive measures, whereas Israel continues to target civilians with weaponry provided by its Western allies.

Such allegations may not be groundless: Britain is in deep economic recession and the US in December 2023 said its funds to assist Ukraine would be exhausted, but still sent weapons packages there.⁴⁷ Britain has signed a long-term security agreement with Ukraine during Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's visit there in January 2024⁴⁸ and along with the US, is now fighting Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. The country has announced of deploying force in Europe to deter Russia. These actions by Western nations may lend credence to the latter's accusations on them. Some Western experts say Putin is trying to use the Israel-Hamas War to his advantage.⁴⁹ This can complicate Middle Eastern geopolitics further, especially given Russia's position as a major supplier of energy, arms seller, former role and current, steadily growing association here. Confrontations (may be on small scale) cannot be ruled out either, as it remains Shia Iran's main ally, whose coreligionist Houthis of Yemen have attacked ships in the Red Sea, which presents potent threat for global

⁴⁶ "UN General Assembly Overwhelmingly Passes Nonbinding Motion Demanding Gaza Ceasefire," *The Times of Israel*, December 13, 2023.

⁴⁷ Missy Ryan, "With Funds Running Out, U.S. Sends More Weapons to Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2023.

⁴⁸ Daniel Szeligowski, *UK Signs Security Agreement with Ukraine* (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2024).

⁴⁹ Andrew Osborn, "Russia's Putin Tries to Use Gaza War to His Geopolitical Advantage," *Reuters*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-putin-sees-political-economic-upside-israels-war-with-hamas-2023-11-17/>.

seaborne trade. It has active military involvement in Syria, while US military bases have come under attacks in eastern part of that country and northern Iraq injuring a number of soldiers; Russia called for end of violence by both Hamas and Israel, but whether it can bring them, Iran, Syria and other anti-Israel parties into dialogue and negotiations, remains unclear. If it can (hypothetically), that will not only weaken the US and Western powers' preponderance, but add also to its own status as a more reliable partner for the region.

Regional and global energy markets will face considerable turbulence. Before this war, Israel and Lebanon signed a maritime boundary agreement, brokered by the US, to explore gas in the Eastern Mediterranean; Israel also has gas supply deal with Egypt. Merely two days after the war began, it stopped supplies to Egypt citing security threats. Israeli oil terminals in Ashkelon are now close for vessels. As an oil importer, its imports are being interrupted. There have appeared more concerns for the country: Lebanon has become highly unstable with its political and economic tumults while Hezbollah has thus far kept its participation limited with firing rockets. If the war escalates and the armed group gets into direct combat against Israel, e.g., like the one of 2008, that will add more woe to energy trade and security, (which already have seen vicious manifestations due to the Russo-Ukrainian War), affecting all in and beyond the region heavily.⁵⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine have given rise to severe fluctuation in global markets; now amid the Israel-Hamas war, attacks by Houthis and Western counterattacks in the Red Sea are driving shipping costs up, resulting in higher price of commodities. The situation is feared by many to get even more dreadful, as all belligerents seem willing to fight on.

4. Future of the Palestinian Statehood

Israel and Palestine have been fighting each other since the Israel's establishment in 1948. Jews and Palestinians mutually clashed as ethnic communities back in those days, i.e., British Mandate Palestine; in addition, there had been a number of riots. In this centuries long conflict (with a number of spinoffs appearing over time), Israel overwhelmingly gained the upper-hand whereas the latter continues to suffer, with loss of people, geographical size, economy, everything. Many attempts at peace could not achieve their goal, let alone create a sovereign Palestine.

⁵⁰ Noam Raydan, "The Gaza War's Impact on Energy Security in the East Mediterranean", *Policy Analysis*, November 01, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gaza-wars-impact-energy-security-east-mediterranean>.

Moreover, with Israel's determination to crush Hamas completely, inflexible attitudes towards Palestinians and their aspiration for a state in relation to the current war, will additionally complicate and jeopardise any prospect in that regard. Similar to them, Hamas pledged for seeing the total destruction of Israel. The conflict over statehood is not confined just between Israel and Palestine, but is substantially influenced by regional, and extra-regional events, factors, players, and their policies too.

Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan and Gaza from Egypt in 1967. At present, opposing forces are governing these two regions, e.g., Fatah (in control of the PA) and Hamas, respectively. While Hamas has gained popularity as a resistance group, the same cannot be said of their West Bank counterparts which are seen as corrupt,⁵¹ inefficient and Western-backed.⁵² There have been varying stances by Israel on a Palestinian state, e.g., ex-Premier Olmert said he would support this, but incumbent finance minister said there was never any state called Palestine; with the war of 2023, its stance has hardened more which can be seen from statements by Netanyahu,⁵³ and its ambassador to the UK, who rejected statehood for Palestine altogether.⁵⁴ The PA is viewed as more moderate, nonetheless, drew Israeli disapproval; in November, Premier Netanyahu opined, in its current form, the organisation was not eligible for governance of Gaza.

There can be conjectures if Israel can totally eliminate Hamas, despite vowing to do so; it should be noted, the country has not been able to wipe them off the West Bank where a comparatively favourable polity rules. During the war, polls show Hamas' popularity has increased even in that part.⁵⁵ The group's military wing and combat infrastructures may be finished off as per Israel's declaration, but what next? Hamas is more than a militia, rather, an ideology. Several groups fought Israeli occupation in the past, had their members killed and ceased ultimately to exist. Afterwards, new groups sprang up in their places to fight for the same purpose. Unless the country addresses and resolves the root causes of Palestinian grievances, e.g., blockade of Gaza, brutal persecution of Palestinians, settler violence, and more

⁵¹ Sawsan Ramahi, *Corruption in the Palestinian Authority* (London: Middle East Monitor 2013).

⁵² The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), *Testimony of the Hon. Elliott Abrams* (New York: CFR, 2023).

⁵³ Jacob Magid, "PM Lobbying Likud Mks, Saying Only He can Prevent a Palestinian State in West Bank, Gaza – Report," *The Times of Israel*, November 27, 2023.

⁵⁴ "Israeli Ambassador to UK Says 'Absolute No' to Palestinian Statehood," *The Belfast Telegraph*, December 15, 2023.

⁵⁵ "Palestinian Poll: Support for Hamas has Tripled in West Bank, 88% Want Abbas to Resign," *The Times of Israel*, December 13, 2023.

importantly, end its occupation of Palestinian territories, groups like Hamas will continue to emerge one after another, forcing Israel and Palestine into never-ending bloodshed, thus endangering potentials of a Palestinian state.

Different suggestions have been proposed for solving the Israeli-Palestine Conflict; of those, the One-state and Two-state solutions are often talked about. The first, i.e., One-State, also known as Single-state solution, refers to plans of establishing a state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, where Jews, Muslims, Christians will all live in peace. The state will comprise of today's Israel, West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights. It will be democratic and secular in nature. This proposal is viewed as a 'rights-based approach' that relies on principles of international human rights found in treaties and declarations. It involves resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict in which outstanding rights, claims, and interests of Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Arabs will be addressed within a single polity.⁵⁶ This proposition has arguments for and against among Israelis and Palestinians alike, but still has numerous problems. The Israeli rightwing wants full annexation of the West Bank with a view to upholding its Jewish character/identity. In 2018, the "Jewish nation-state law/Nationality Bill" was passed, thus defining the country as a Jewish homeland. The law is opposite of establishing a single, democratic state as for prioritising and empowering a specific ethnicity. In terms of equal rights, Jewish settlers are not likely to stop their malpractice, let alone cede lands and properties they occupied. There is also fear among Israeli public of becoming outnumbered by Palestinians due to higher birthrates among the latter unlike Jewish people.

On the other hand, the Two-state solution speaks about establishing two separate states for two separate peoples: Palestinians and Israelis. It arose after the 1967 Arab-Israel War, and gained further momentum when in 1993, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Yasser Arafat and Israeli government of then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords. The Accords were based on the idea of a two-state solution, which is backed by the US, Britain, and the UN; Israel too had been supportive of it until the current war. The two-state proposal, nevertheless, has diverse hurdles to overcome, among which Israeli security concerns, Palestinian refugees' right of return, expansion of Jewish settlements, lack of clarity over actual creation of a sovereign Palestine, etc., are main. The last issue may have remained uncertain for a long time, but the earlier three resonate profoundly with both

⁵⁶ George E. Bisharat, "Maximizing Rights: The One State Solution to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," *Global Jurist* 8, no. 2 (2008): 01-02.

parties, even when there is lower level of violence or no apparent warlike situation. Like the ‘higher birthrates among Palestinians’ anxiety in the One-state solution for example, if Palestinian refugees are allowed for return, Jewish population will face outnumbering anyway. Likewise, returned refugees can demand their lands/properties back. However, Jewish settlers are unlikely to comply with that and thus further clashes will erupt, which in turn, will threaten Israeli security. The Israel-Hamas War of 2023 has seen both belligerents assuming progressively stubborn stand about each other’s extermination. On political front, Netanyahu rejects this solution, and Palestinians are preferring the One-state solution more (e.g., the slogan “From the River to the Sea” in demonstrations across the globe).

Foreign actors and their policies exert a lot of influence over the Palestinian statehood question. First is the US. The war has created substantial level of polarisation within the country itself, visible in political circles, entertainment industry, academia, religious groups, etc. Voices critical of Israel and its war in Gaza resulting in massive death tolls of civilians and other atrocities by Israel have come increasingly under fire, people removed from posts and works, their contracts terminated, irrespective of their positions. Criticisms of the Israeli state or any of its policies are repeatedly branded as anti-Semitism, although this accusation can be debated. President Biden has been at odds with Netanyahu in some cases over the conduct of his military campaign.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, in the US presidential election race for 2024, former president Donald Trump is showing to be on the rise in popularity.⁵⁸ During his tenure as president, he became known for staunch pro-Israel policies: for example, in December 2017, his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital along with plan of moving the US diplomatic mission there⁵⁹ and in 2019, recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.⁶⁰ His administration’s peace plan was equally controversial, calling for less concessions from Israel and imposing more of those on Palestine. At the same time, his policies also gave rise to mounting tensions with Iran and Syria. However,

⁵⁷ Laura King and Tracy Wilkinson, “As Biden-Netanyahu Gulf Widens, Israeli Leader Vows to Continue Gaza War ‘Until the End,’” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 2023.

⁵⁸ Gustaf Kilander and Ariana Baio, “2024 Polls: Trump Leads Biden in Seven Swing States,” *The Independent*, December 15, 2023.

⁵⁹ Yousef M. Aljamal, “Trump’s Decision to Recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s Capital: Domestic Motivations and Regional Circumstances,” *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 15, no. 1 (2020):119.

⁶⁰ Jean Galbraith, “United States Recognises Israeli Sovereignty over the Golan Heights,” *American Journal of International Law* 113, no. 3 (2019): 613-614.

in the new race, he criticised Netanyahu and rather lauded the Hezbollah.⁶¹ Other candidates from his party have more or less, pro-Israel position. Chris Christie is one such figure. In 2012 while visiting Israel, he warned against Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.⁶² In November 2023, he again visited the country, met the premier, president, and relatives of hostages. In presidential debates, he rejected calls for a ceasefire and spoke of plans to send US troops to free American hostages taken by Hamas, if he were president.⁶³ These scenarios present more challenges and uncertainties for the Palestinian statehood. Situations are not looking good in Europe as well, a region viewed as sympathetic to the Palestinian cause for long time. Recently, France, Germany and Italy called for sanctions on Hamas and its supporters.

The German state, Saxony-Anhalt now requires allegiance to Israel if anyone wants to become German citizen.⁶⁴ France, Germany, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Britain, etc., have banned pro-Palestine protests.⁶⁵ Moreover, rightwing, conservative leaders in Europe are gaining broader popular support as backlash against migrants and refugees from ordinary local people is growing at the same time. Geert Wilders, populist politician and incumbent premier of the Netherlands, longtime associate and sympathiser of Israel, makes no secret of his stern opposition to Muslims. He even suggested for relocating displaced Palestinians in Jordan, indicating their right for a sovereign state would not be accepted.⁶⁶ Spain and Belgium have spoken in support of Palestinian statehood, but in the face of growing apathy and lack of cooperation from others, opposition in many cases, the Russo-Ukrainian War, energy shortage, economic downturn, the migrant crisis and ensuing popular resentment, how far their support can go, remains to be seen.

The same goes for the genocide case filed against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by South Africa. Germany declared it would come to defend

⁶¹ Manjiri Chitre, "Israel Reacts to Donald Trump's 'Hezbollah' Remark on Hamas Attack: Shameful," *The Hindustan Times*, October 13, 2023.

⁶² "New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie Takes Hawkish Line on Israel," *The Times of Israel*, April 18, 2012.

⁶³ Mallory Wilson, "Christie Says He'd Send U.S. Troops to Rescue American Hostages in Gaza," *The Washington Times*, December 06, 2023.

⁶⁴ Kate Brady, "In This East German State, Recognizing Israel is a Citizenship Requirement," *The Washington Post*, December 06, 2023.

⁶⁵ Daniel Boffey, "Why are European Governments Clamping Down on the Right to Protest?," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2023.

⁶⁶ Zvika Klein, "Dutch Politician Wilders Slammed for 'Jordan Is Palestine' Claim," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 25, 2023.

Israel in this case; conversely, Slovenia formally joined the proceedings concerning Israeli practices in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Indonesia followed Slovenia's step and Namibia condemned Germany for its announcement. The case underwent substantial review and on 26 January 2024, the court announced its verdict, ordering Israel to undertake all necessary measures for stopping acts of genocide in Gaza. Netanyahu rejected the decision saying Israel had all rights for self-defence, and simultaneously his administration accused some staff members of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) of being involved in the 7th October attacks; the UN said these allegations would be investigated and later suspended several of its employees; Philippe Lazzarini, head of this UN body, called these were highly disparaging, and employees would face criminal prosecution if found linked with acts of terror.⁶⁷ Britain also came to echo Israeli standpoint; the British government said, Israeli actions in Gaza could not be termed as genocide.⁶⁸

This is somewhat reminiscent of the Goldstone Report Controversy about the Gaza War of 2008-09, where a UN fact finding mission led by justice Richard Goldstone accused both Israel and Palestinian militia groups of committing war crimes. Israel however, said the report was biased against itself and, therefore, refused any cooperation. The US was of similar opinion too which could be seen in extensive criticism by US lawmakers of the mission and their report. Justice Goldstone later regretted saying his report might be inaccurate, there was no evidence to suggest Israeli forces deliberately targeted Palestinian civilians and instead, placed blame on Hamas for targeting Israeli civilians. This was contradictory with his report's earlier findings. Hence, after the latest ICJ verdict, whether Israel will or can be held accountable in reality, is uncertain, especially when powerful allies are there to provide assistance, and many of its misdeeds or violations have gone unpunished in the past. On the contrary, although Palestine has some supporters, they are not in a position or adequately capable of asserting their will in these regards. For example, there are strong pro-Israel advocacy groups and people worldwide (Israeli lobby), but there is hardly any such for Palestine. Netanyahu strongly rejected Biden's proposal for a two-state solution, but later said the statement was not meant as such. His country proposed a deal containing two months of ceasefire in exchange of hostages, but Hamas rejected it, accusing the Israeli side of rejecting their proposal, which demanded for the group's stay in power, release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli

⁶⁷ Hira Humayun, "UN Agency Fires Staff Allegedly Involved in Hamas Attack," *CNN*, January 26, 2024.

⁶⁸ "UK Says It has 'Considerable Concerns' about ICJ Ruling, Rejects Genocide Accusation," *The Times of Israel*, January 27, 2024.

prisons, relocation of Hamas' top leaders in other countries and full-scale withdrawal by Israel from Gaza.⁶⁹

As for Netanyahu, there have been criticism, opposition, questions raised on his leadership, conduct and plans to end the war from the very beginning. In mid-January 2024, an audio tape came out where the premier purportedly criticised Qatar's role as a mediator and this was not lightly taken by that country. Families of Israeli hostages burst into a Knesset session meeting with demand of doing more for release of hostages. Some blamed him for intentionally creating tensions with Qatar. In addition to the rejection of ceasefire plans, such controversies will augment suspicions of his sincerity to end the war. Amid the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East's (UNRWA) investigations, several Western nations, namely, the US, Britain, Australia, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Italy—all stopped funding for the agency. Israeli foreign minister Israel Katz welcomed their decision and opined after the war would end, this organisation should be replaced with those dedicated to genuine peace and progress in rebuilding Gaza; he went on to accuse the agency of having ties with Palestinian militia groups. Under such adverse circumstances consequently, it can be surmised, potential of Palestinian statehood will encounter multifaceted ordeals in the coming days.

5. Concluding Remarks

The latest Israel-Hamas War is dragging. Ceasefire attempts are not working, death tolls are soaring each day, infrastructures are destroyed, putting Gaza's economy into shambles, yet neither side is showing any sign or willingness to end fighting. Sunni Muslim militia group Hamas has the stated goal of overthrowing Israeli occupation and forming a sovereign Palestinian state. After 7th October attacks, the Netanyahu government also became adamant on their total obliteration. But that goal has not been achieved yet which seemed easy earlier, especially as Israel has far superior power than Hamas. There are now speculations if Israel can do it indeed. Two instances can help to understand their reciprocal hatred and mistrust. In late January 2024, Netanyahu straightaway rejected another ceasefire proposal again, which demanded full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and release of Palestinian

⁶⁹ "Hamas Reportedly Rejects Two-Month Cease-Fire Proposal by Israel in Exchange for Hostages," *Haaretz*, January 23, 2024.

prisoners.⁷⁰ Hamas, on the other hand, was preparing in northern Gaza for launching new attacks.⁷¹ These also indicate the war will not end soon, and be that one-state or two-state solution, Palestine will continue to suffer. Several factors worked behind fuelling this war, namely political, military, religious, ethno-racial, etc. Due to the Middle East's continuing, if not eternal, importance in global affairs, it is severely destabilising the region itself and will in turn, have far-reaching impacts on the region's geopolitics, where interests, policies, roles of external actors and events have always been influential.

The Middle East already has witnessed the visible impacts of this war. The prevalent notion of Israel as an invulnerable force, shattered again after 1973 and 2008. Its normalisation process with Gulf Arab nations through the Abraham Accords suffered grave setbacks since they are now suspending the discussions and asking Israel to stop its military campaign in Gaza; meanwhile, Iran, an archenemy of Israel, is trying to normalise/restore bilateral ties with Gulf nations and that may not work in Israel's favour since they all support Palestinians, albeit there is no surety this rapprochement will go forward and be durable. For Israel, there can be undesired fallouts, e.g., collapse of previous governments when they went into war. While its ground and aerial assaults go on in Gaza, if the war spreads beyond its boundaries, the country may not be able to sustain that for long, owing to geographical, economic, military and other constraints, because fighting on more than one front may not be viable even with allies' assistance. Massive human calamity is happening in Gaza pushing aid and relief agencies to their limits. Israeli settlers are evicting Bedouins and capturing their properties just like they do against Palestinians. This may force Bedouins to take up arms which will create further instability in the region, risking possible ethnic conflicts.

There has been call for boycotting Israeli and Western companies, but will not eventually succeed, as these entities are quite resilient in dealing with such situations. Global and regional energy markets will face considerable disturbance given the region's position as a global hub of energy supply and business; Israel, like others, has not been immune to such difficulty in both exports and imports. The longtime neglected Israel-Palestine conflict may have come into forefront, but it also

⁷⁰ Patrick Wintour, "Netanyahu Rules out Ceasefire Deal that would Mean Withdrawal from Gaza," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2024.

⁷¹ Jason Burke, "Hamas Regroups in Northern Gaza for New Offensive," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2024.

has given rise to refugee crisis. Neighbouring or regional Muslim nations do not accept them anymore. Antisemitism is growing in many countries, notwithstanding all Jews are not pro-Israel or Zionists but will encounter violence for what Israel is doing against Palestinians. Another way Middle Eastern geopolitics will be reshaped is growing possibility for renewal of big power rivalry. Russia has blamed eruption of this war on failure of Western policies. The country had been a major player here in the Cold War era, and for some years, is trying equally to regain its former position in global affairs, in which the Middle East is no exception. However, Western scholars say it may try to use the war for own advantage in the Russo-Ukrainian War. It is the main ally of Iran, and assisting Bashar al Assad of Syria actively, military, political and logistics alike.

Similar to other affairs in the region, Palestinian statehood is hostage to external phenomena. The US, prime external player in the region and ally of Israel, saw extensive divide grow in its own land. Politics, show business, education sector, media—all have deeply been affected. The US twice vetoed ceasefire proposals at the UN in favour of Israel but could not succeed. These may increase US-Middle East crack as the proposals were brought by Egypt and Jordan. Recently, some rift emerged between the US and Israel; President Biden criticised Netanyahu over the war's conduct, but Israel's toughened attitudes on Hamas, Palestinians, and question of their statehood, meant that was not paid attention to. The upcoming US presidential election will substantially influence the issue. Former president Trump, while in power, was known for his openly pro-Israel policies. His peace plan drew similar controversy, depriving Palestinians and benefitting Israel; nevertheless, his statements on Hezbollah and Israel regarding the war during latest presidential campaign were widely criticised.

Another aspirant, Chris Christie has made his pro-Israel position clear. US' involvement is likely to be growing as can be seen in intensifying attacks and counterattacks in the Red Sea; on 28 January 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI; a pro-Iran Shia insurgent group) attacked US military bases in Iraq, Jordan and Syria, killing a number of soldiers, for which the US has vowed retaliation. This can mean the country getting entangled in another conflict, which will simultaneously erode its capacity of providing assistance for Ukraine and Israel. Situations in Europe are not looking conducive for Palestine's cause as well. The migrant crisis has produced grievous fault-lines in European countries; besides, there are the war in Ukraine, energy sector turmoil, and economic recession. Anti-migrant and refugee sentiments,

people, groups, have been gaining prominence and becoming mainstream. Several European countries have shown fervent support for Israel while banning pro-Palestinian demonstrations; two even sent their military as sign of camaraderie. This means they will not abandon Israel at any cost. Some of them do sympathise with statehood for Palestine, but will face daunting tasks to implement that. Judging from these, it seems a sovereign Palestinian state has turned into nearly an unachievable objective with this war, and will gradually become more so with complexities arising in the region and outside.