**Why Israel lost this round**

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The present conflict in the Middle East involving the State of Israel on the one side and the Palestine Administration of Mahmud Abbas and Hamas on the other side, was about to end with a UN approved ceasefire, with the Palestinians emerging as deeply wounded but victorious in this round. The responsibility for losing this round of hostilities short of a full scale war, despite Israel’s superiority in weaponry and its staunch support by the Biden Administration, rests solely with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is only an interim head of government in Israel, and is under investigation on corruption charges.

In March this year, Mr Netanyahu wrongly calculated his moves to quell local protests over forced evacuations in East Jerusalem carried out by Israeli authorities to continue with new Jewish settlements replacing indigenous Palestinian homes in the disputed Al Quds area. His government’s heavy-handed response brought more protests all over the occupied territories, including Gaza. With the entry of Hamas in the conflict to back the helpless Palestinians, Netanyahu ruthlessly sacrificed civilian Palestinian lives like Paschal lambs to increase his political ratings in Israel. He probably did not realise, despite Biden Administration’s unconditional support for Israel, that his government’s illegal actions in Sheikh Jarrah, storming of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque in Ramadan, and IDF’s continued rocket bombings of Gaza in a completely disproportionate and indiscriminate manner would create such a strong global reaction, including serious concern from Israel’s European friends. The international outcry resulted in the convening of several inconclusive meetings of the UN Security Council and an extraordinary session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 20 May to call on Israel to observe an immediate ceasefire, respect human rights, implement the UN resolutions on Palestine and cooperate in finding a just and lasting two-state resolution of the Arab Israeli conflict.

Until a few weeks ago, Israel seemed all set to quietly swallow Jerusalem following establishment of diplomatic relations with half a dozen rag tag Islamic and Arab countries, blessed by the former Trump administration. Israel was also able to divide the Islamic countries into two blocks: those who believe that it is better to deal with Israel as a friend in order to resolve the Arab-Israeli problem, and others who want Israel to deliver on its international obligations on Palestine first before they establish diplomatic relations with Israel. But after the present show of force by Israel, all those diplomatic gains for Israel have reversed as far as international goodwill for Israel is concerned, and to add salt to Israel’s wounds, its sole challenger in the occupied territories, Hamas, has increased its popularity among the Palestinians in the occupied territories. This conflict has politically proved costly for Israel.

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Israeli government grossly underestimated the international reaction for attacking Muslim worshipers in Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem in the holy month of Ramzan. It therefore decided to divert the attention of the world away from the third most respected holy site of Islam which was desecrated by its security forces in front of live videos which later went viral on social media all over the globe. Instead, Israel tried to portray the crisis as a ‘war’ between Israel and Hamas. With the continued aerial bombings of Gaza in a totally ruthless manner for several days, under the rubric of the right to defend itself, Israel wanted to create the impression that the most important thing for the international community was to ask Israel for ceasefire instead of censuring Israel for building new settlements on Palestinian lands, using force to evict indigenous Palestinians from their homes in occupied territories and alter the disputed status of Jerusalem by illegally making it the capital of Israel. This was also the focus of the Israeli Ambassador’s speech at the extraordinary UN General Assembly Session on the Israel Palestine conflict.

Israel is now caught up with another problem of facing the charges of war crimes when the evidence of destroying civilian infrastructure, hospitals, schools and killing women and children in Gaza is presented against Israel before the International Criminal Court at an appropriate time in the future. Israel cannot defend itself against such evidence because Netanyahu is on record to have said that Israeli forces only targeted Hamas militants. Surely, hospitals, schools and women and children in their homes cannot be counted as Hamas militants. Among the 248 Palestinians killed by Israel only one was claimed by Israel to be a senior Hamas militant. Until now Israel has got away with the impression that Hamas was the problem in the Occupied Territories and neither the Palestine Administration nor other Palestinians who do not support Hamas were any problem. However, while trying to make the ceasefire an important element in the current conflict to make the root cause of the problem fade away from public eye, Israel has gone too far in its aggression against innocent Palestinians. They have been punished not because they were involved in the rocket attacks against Israel, but because they support and vote for Hamas. The message Israel has given Palestinians is that if they continue to vote for Hamas in the elections, this is how they will be responded by the Zionist regime.

Israel tried to reduce the impact of international horror at the indiscriminate killing of civilians in the aerial strikes by reviving the memories of the Holocaust through the Zionist controlled media and pubic speeches of politicians and government functionaries. The Holocaust memories were meant to create public support for the government of Israel when the world felt sorry for the killing of innocent women and children in Palestine by the Israeli raids. The Holocaust is now a major theme in the Israeli and Zionist propaganda machinery in the global print and electronic media.

The Israeli government also tried to create an equation between anti Semitism and anti Zionism, which are two opposite things. While hate speech against Jews, as followers of a great and oldest Abrahamic faith, is unacceptable in any community in our times, sentiments against Zionism are always linked to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories and its political agenda to keep expanding Israel’s borders through illegal land grabs by national legislation, intimidation and forced evacuations.

The implementation of a UN brokered ceasefire between Israel and Palestine should not be an end in itself but a prelude to involving the Quartet and the US as a neutral arbiter between the two sides. If it is ignored like any other incident dominating world headlines for a few days and then fading out in the oblivion, the conflict could come back again to haunt the Israelis and Palestinians in the future. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that we act now to avoid this unwanted scenario.

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