**Another mass exodus from Gaza?**

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The present escalation of violence sparked by forced eviction of Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in occupied East Jerusalem and some other areas where Palestinians have been living for decades – on land now claimed by Israeli settlers – is a reminder to the world community that the Palestine issue remains a tinderbox for peace in the Middle East. As of Friday, Israeli strikes killed 119 Palestinian civilians, including 31 children, and injured 830. Amnesty International has denounced Israeli aggression. Indeed, military jets pounding civilian compounds can never be justified as “self-defence”. Elsewhere, the travesty of the Israeli judicial system is on full display. For even though the country’s high court had, last weekend, stayed an order to expel four Palestinian families from their homes – in a bid to seize property to hand over to Israeli settlers – this offers only temporary reprieve and overlooks the internationally recognised dictum of historical claim. Images of innocent Palestinian children crying as their mothers are detained in Israeli military vehicles extend beyond the heart-wrenching.

The Israeli government has resorted to aerial bombing and the amassing of troops along the Gaza Strip. Over 7,000 reservists have been called up and there was orchestrated confusion on Friday when Tel Aviv informed the media that it had begun a ground offensive in Gaza before backtracking just an hour later. No matter, hundreds of Palestinians had already fled their homes. Thus, it appears that by deliberately escalating tensions, Israel is forcing yet another mass exodus of Palestinians from their homeland.

This strategy suits Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he tries to cling on to power, on the one hand. On the other, the escalation of violence will prove an effective tool for Israeli right-wing supporters in US Congress and the Senate to try and sabotage the Biden administration’s peace efforts in the Middle East, including re-engagement with Iran. World leaders, especially Muslim statesmen such as Prime Minister Imran Khan and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have been at the forefront of global efforts to reduce tensions. Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that Israel stop indiscriminate air force attacks on civilians. Egypt and Qatar have also reportedly initiated diplomatic efforts for de-escalation, but to no avail, so far.

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The UN Security Council has been stymied from convening and making an effective statement, most likely due to US opposition and the potential use of veto power if other members move forward with any condemnation of Israel. As long as the Israeli political establishment remains held hostage to ultra-orthodox Zionists and the Biden White House lacks both the political consensus and the will to hold Israel accountable for its repressive, discriminatory and inhuman policies – the dream of coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis will remain elusive. The massacres of Sabra and Shatila remain fresh blots on the region’s history books. And given the ongoing Israeli offensive there is the real danger of a bloodbath in Gaza if the Israel embarks on a land incursion into the area.

The strategic US bipartisan support to Tel Aviv remains solid. Indeed, the more than $8 billion in annual unconditional support to Israel points to American complicity in war crimes against the Palestinians. At best, it signals indifference. However, Senator Bernie Sanders represents a glimmer of hope, with his demand that the US “call for an immediate ceasefire and an end to provocation and illegal settlement activity”. He did not mince his words when he said: “Israeli children should not have to spend the night scared in bomb shelters, as many are doing tonight. Palestinian children should not have to grow up under the constant violence and oppression of occupation, as so many do, and have done.” By contrast, the Abraham Accords, signed during the Trump years, proved an exercise in futility; contrary to the claims of its authors that this pact among Israel, the UAE and Bahrain would pave the way to ultimate resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict and achieve lasting regional peace.

The realisation of the dream of a peaceful Middle East where Palestinians and Israelis live in two independent states with peace and cooperation will require strong moral courage and vision by the US leadership. It is also imperative that the Israeli leadership engage in a paradigm shift in its strategy to ensure national security. For as things currently stand, this relies on perpetuating conflict, repression and manipulation of the US state power structure. Such a shift would require the Israeli state to transition from its antagonist policies and move towards mature statehood based on equality of human dignity for all citizens including Arabs, respect for international law and human rights as well as peaceful coexistence with all neighbours including the Palestinian state.

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