

OPINION

Israel-Hamas war: Gaza offensive bound to widen conflict; West Asia set for a makeover

As a result of the Israel-Hamas conflict, the US exit strategy from West Asia has come to a standstill and the region is poised to become a battleground for intense inter-power rivalry in the pursuit of strategic balance

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi | Last Updated: October 27, 2023 19:39:18 IST



A view of the site where Palestinian houses were destroyed by Israeli strikes, as the conflict between Israel and Hamas continues, in the Gaza Strip on 27 October, 2023. Reuters

On 7 October 2023, Israel's 75-year history will be marked as its darkest day. Hamas's unprecedented aggression shattered the myth of its infallible intelligence apparatus and compelling deterrence. A nation that has faced an existential crisis since its creation on 14 May 1948 and successively defeated the Arab designs to wipe it off the global map

suffered an ignominious humiliation at the hands of a terrorist outfit. This was a rude shock.

Half a century ago, on 6 October, 1973, the day of Yom Kippur, Israel was surprised when Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated offensive across the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights, respectively. It fought back with tremendous resilience, tilting the balance in a little over two weeks. This time, it's a 'Non-State Actor' (NSA) that has forced Israel into an entirely different conflict, which is set to be a long-drawn affair.

The 'Al Aqsa Flood', launched by Hamas on 7 October, 2023, was a thoroughly planned operation, evident from its timing, scale, and methodology. The politico-military objectives were to bring the Palestine issue back to the centre stage, dispel the fallacy of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) invincibility, garner support from the Muslim world and impede the process of Arab nations' rapprochement with Israel, especially following the Abraham Accords in 2020.

The Hamas attack was marked by a fierce rocket barrage and a multi-mode insertion of assaulting elements that managed to inflict over 1,400 fatal casualties including a large number of security forces personnel besides taking some 220 hostages. Its next phase envisages engaging in unconventional warfare in densely populated areas by luring the IDF to launch a ground offensive into Gaza making the venture highly cost prohibitive.

The Israeli response was swift with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declaring a state of war. 'Operation Iron Sword' was launched to quickly restore the adverse situation and surround Gaza, alongside the establishment of a sea blockade. In addition, 300,000 reserves were mobilised and special forces, 'Sayeret Matkal' commandos, were inducted into the war zone to shape the battlefield for operations in Gaza including hostage rescue missions.

With the aim of neutralising Hamas, the IDF has planned to execute the Gaza offensive in three phases. Phase one, which is currently underway, seeks to destroy Hamas infrastructure to weaken its fighting potential. Phase two entails clearing Hamas pockets of resistance and is expected to be a prolonged one. The third phase envisions Israel's complete withdrawal from Gaza after establishing new governance and security apparatus. To avoid civilian casualties, the Israeli government gave an ultimatum to Gazans to relocate from the north to the south, where over a million people crossed

over Wadi Gaza. As anticipated, Hamas is trading the release of hostages in return for essential relief materials.

The battle of Gaza is bound to be bloody one given that Hamas has fortified the area with elaborate network of underground tunnels-referred to as 'Metro System'. Hamas aims to engage Israeli forces into close quarter combat and employ civilians as human shields. With around 20,000 fighters, Hamas has the capacity to fight a prolonged 'guerilla war'.

Israel's topmost priority is to target the Hamas leadership and destroy its fighting potential, employing ultra-high-tech precision-guided munitions, bunker-bursting bombs like the GBU-28 and laser weapons. With the war now in its third week, over 6,000 people have reportedly been killed and nearly three times as many have been injured in Gaza. The intensity of the Israeli shelling of Gaza has reached a level never before witnessed in recent times.

The Israel-Hamas war is gradually turning into a multi-front conflict. Hezbollah is keen to draw Lebanon into the fight, evident from the intensity of exchanges of fire with the IDF, the deadliest since the 2006 skirmish. Iran-aligned Houthis are also active, launching missiles and drones from Yemen towards Israel, with a few intercepted by an American navy destroyer last week. In Syria and Iraq, where the US maintains 2,500 and 900 troops, respectively, its military installations have come under drone attacks lately. According to the Deputy Commander of the 'Iran Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,' the 'Axis of Resistance' (Iran-backed militias in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon) is ready to strike Israel from multiple fronts in case it invades Gaza.

The ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has wider ramifications as the global community stands fiercely divided on the issue. The US and the West stand with Israel and strongly condemn the Hamas barbaric attack. President Joe Biden, during his visit to Tel Aviv on 18 October, 2023, confirmed America's unwavering solidarity. However, he did caution Prime Minister Netanyahu to exercise restraint and hold off on the ground offensive until the US has deployed its assets. As of now, 11 US warships are in the Mediterranean, with 2,000 marines already inside Israel and another 15,000 troops ready for deployment.

On the other hand, China, along with Russia, are ardent supporters of Hamas and Palestine. President Xi Jinping has termed Israeli actions well beyond the norms of self-defence. Russia's detente with Israel appears to be virtually over. The war in the West Asia suits Moscow and Beijing as it distracts Washington from Ukraine and the Western Pacific. India has taken a nuanced position, while condemning Hamas' terrorist actions; it has also supported Palestine and a two-nation solution. With deep strategic interests in this region, which include energy security, a large expat community, membership in the I2U2 (Israel, India, UAE, USA) grouping, and the proposed IMEEC (India, West Asia, Europe Corridor), India has high stakes in the stability of the region.

Within West Asia, Muslim unity is evident as the Islamic world wholeheartedly backs Hamas. Major Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, while Qatar has supported Hamas. An important meeting of the heads of Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority with President Biden during his recent visit to Israel was scuttled in the wake of the bombing of Al Ahli hospital in Gaza, which was attributed to Israel. However, Biden gave a clean chit to Israel, implicating the other side in the heinous act.

As a sequel to the Israel-Hamas conflict, the US exit strategy from West Asia stands stalled. The region is bound to be the scene of intense inter-power rivalry in the quest for strategic balance. Willy-nilly, the geopolitical architecture of the West Asia is set for a makeover.

The author is a war veteran, currently Professor Strategic and International Studies. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely that of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.