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Israel - Palestine Problem

Creation of Israel

Historically, the Syria- Palestine region as the historians called it, i.e. area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, was given the name of Palestine by the Romans in 2 century CE. The Ottoman Empire ruled the complete greater Syrian region from 1517 to 1917, and after its collapse, at the end of World War- I, British Mandate for Palestine was established. In early 1900, Jewish colonial Trust was formed to promote Zionism in the Palestine region. This Trust was given support by the British by opening an Anglo- Palestine Company (APC) in London in 1902. The region during the British Mandate period had Jews, Christians and Arabs and irrespective of their ethnicity they came to be known as Palestinians. Large scale Jewish immigration from abroad, especially from European nations to this region took place during this period. At that stage Jewish ownership of Palestinian land was only 7.04%. In November 1947, United Nations General Assembly passed a Partition Plan for the division of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state, with Jerusalem and its surrounding areas as a common entity under a special international regime. In this partition plan Gaza strip and West Bank were a part of the Arab state. While, the Jewish leaders accepted the plan, the Arab League rejected the plan of partition and threatened with military action. On 14 May 1948, Israel declared its independence within the boundary delineated in the partition plan.

What is Gaza Strip ?

Gaza Strip is 25 miles by 7 miles rectangular strip of coastal land wedged between the Mediterranean Sea and Israel (shares a 51 km border). To its South West it shares an 11 km border with Egypt. It saw a huge influx of refugee population from the Israeli mandated area after the 1948 Arab Israel war. The population on the Gaza Strip is 99 % Sunni Muslims and the rest are Christians, Armenians and others. It is the world's most densely populated area (1.5 million in 146 square miles).

History of Gaza Strip

The combined Arab forces of Syria, Jordan and Egypt attacked the newly formed nation of Israel, called the 1948 Arab -Israel War. At the end of the war some areas designated for the Arabs like the Jordanian region of West Bank, and, Jericho were captured by Israel. Later, in 1950 Jordan captured West Bank back from Israel. After the 1948 war, the control of Gaza Strip went to Egypt. In the 'Six Day War' in 1967, Israel once again recaptured both West Bank and Gaza Strip from Jordan and Egypt respectively. Moreover, it also attached East Jerusalem in 1956 and captured it. Since, these territories, which were originally allotted to the Arabs under the UN Partition Plan, most countries call these as Israeli occupied territories. Incidentally, Jerusalem is the most holy place for all the three religions, i.e. Jews, Muslims and Christians, as the origin of all these faiths can be traced back into history at Jerusalem. Immediately after the 1967 war, Israel proposed to return some territories captured during the war to buy peace, like the Golan Heights to Syria, the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and most of the West Bank to Jordan. However, the Arab community rejected the proposal. Later, in 1979, Egypt signed a Peace Treaty with Israel on the conditions of providing autonomy to the Palestinians and the return of Sinai Peninsula back to Egypt. In this agreement Gaza Strip was not mentioned and it remained in the control of Israel. Also, as a part of the Peace Treaty, a 100 meters wide buffer zone between Egypt and Gaza (as it remained the south western part of Israel), called the Philadephi Corridor was to be left. This corridor was

barricaded by Israel after the 2000 Palestinian uprising. This is the famous barricade underneath which Hamas (Palestinian Militant wing) has built tunnels to smuggle in arms and ammunition for launching attacks on Israel.

Role of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)

In 1964, PLO was formed at Cairo, in Egypt. Its popularity grew under its leader Yasser Arafat towards nationalistic orientation. In 1974 the organisation was recognised as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab states and the same year it was granted observer status by UN as a national liberation movement. This UN resolution was rejected by Israel. The first and the second Intifadas (1987 to 1993) or popular Palestinian uprisings against Israel's illegal occupation of Gaza Strip and West Bank, and the proclamation of the State of Palestine by the PLO in 1988 led to giving the movement greater legitimacy. The Oslo Accord was the first interim peace agreement between Palestine and Israel in 1993. It lasted for 5 years and under this agreement Israel started pulling out its forces from Gaza Strip and West Bank and also the creation of Palestinian National Authority (PNA). This was an interim organisation that was created to administer a limited form of Palestinian self-governance in the areas of West bank and Gaza Strip. This form of governance was allowed to function during an interim period of five years, pending a decision on the final status of the occupied territories. However, the final status agreement on Palestine is still undecided in spite of pressure from various countries and UN to resolve the issue and repeated dialogues between PNA and Israel, like at Camp David in 2005. As per the Oslo Accord, the Palestine National Authority (PNA) was given certain limited rights in the areas of Gaza and West Bank, like, culture, education, ID cards issuance and distribution of land and water left by Israel. However, Israel continues to have military and civil movement control over the Palestinians in these areas. Israel does not allow free exercise of political activities. PNA local elections were held in 2005 (organised by its President Yasser Arafat before his death) and Mahmoud Abbas, of Fatah party won the elections and became the first President of PNA with 62 % majority.

Who are Hamas ?

Hamas is the Palestine's largest militant Islamic group that aims to create an Islamic state as it existed before Second World War, i.e. without the presence of Israel. It was founded in 1987 as part of the armed uprising against Israeli occupation of Gaza and West Bank. Its supporters reject any peace negotiations with Israel and believe in creating a Palestinian state on the model of Iran (that also explains Iranian support to Hamas, though they have a Sunni orientation, while Iran has a Shia majority). Hamas has a public face where it conducts humanitarian and welfare activities, including education. Its leaders are reported to be operating from Lebanon, which had a huge influx of refugees during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, after the occupation of West Bank by Israel. Lebanon, also has its own militant faction called the Hezbollah, who are fighting a civil sectarian war against the Christian population of Lebanon and also supports the Palestinian right to self determination and its Hamas Group. Besides the support of Lebanon and Syria, Hamas is also being supported by Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood party, which had also briefly come into power in Egypt.

Reasons for Conflict between Hamas and Fatah

After the first Elections of PNA, held in 2005, Presidential elections were required to be held again after the expiry of four year term in 2009, however, it kept getting postponed because of a conflict over power sharing between the Fatah and Hamas. The main reason is that Hamas won the Legislative Council elections, held in Gaza in 2006 and they refused to take orders from the PNA, Fatah President, Mahoud Abbas. The ideological difference between the moderate Fatah, who want to abide by the Oslo Agreement to bring peace to the region, and the hardliner Hamas, who do not want to negotiate with Israel, is actually the root cause of dispute. During this period of uncertainty, in 2009, a Hamas leader Aziz al Divik was promoted from the chair of Speaker of Legislative Council of PNA to become the interim president of PNA, till elections were held in Gaza. In 2010 local elections were held only for West Bank which the Palestinian leaders of Gaza do not accept. Hence, there are two power centres within the Israeli occupied Palestine, West Bank is Fatah ruled, while Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas. Meanwhile, in 2012 Palestine was accorded non

member observer status by the UN Assembly, thus, completely recognising its right to self determination. Following the accord of the upgraded observer status to the Palestine State, both Hamas and Fatah, understood the importance of projecting a united front and came to an agreement on 02 June 2014 to hold the state general elections within six months.

Why Is Gaza So Important to Israel ?

The Gaza coastline on the Levant Basin sits atop of 1.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Hence, the exploration of Gaza's natural resources by Israel make its occupation significant to them. Palestinians working in these industrial zones are treated as slaves by big corporations exploring the natural resources.

Hence, the insecurity and distrust for Israel, motivated the people of Palestine in Gaza Strip to turn to the armed faction 'Hamas' rather than the moderate Fatah regime, who lost the Legislative Council elections to Hamas in 2006 . That is the reason why, civilians in Gaza prefer to face casualties rather than leading a life of deprivation under Israel. Israel has no strategic depth against an attack launched by the combined Arab forces. West Bank and East Jerusalem extends right up to the water obstacle of Jordan River, giving Israel adequate strategic depth and protection to its East and Gaza Strip provide Israel a buffer towards Egypt, up to the strategic Sinai Peninsula. The significance of Sinai Peninsula is that whosoever occupies it holds the key to the Suez Canal that connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and further, the India Ocean. Hence, Egypt took it back from Israel who had captured it during the 1967 Arab-Israel war, in exchange of signing a peace treaty with Israel. Egypt forces during the war were unable to move up quickly and deploy across the Suez Canal as some of the bridges over it were destroyed by Israeli air force. If Israel loses the Gaza Strip, to Palestine, Egypt will get adequate time for build up of its forces and also room for maneuver in collaboration with the Hamas to wage a war against Israel. Israel has restricted the use Mediterranean Sea up to only 2 nautical miles and has imposed blockade across the Egypt border to prevent military hardware from coming into Gaza. This also is a guise to isolate the Palestinian population and suppress their voices. A concept called the 'Economic Hit man' is also a reason for the world community to be not so forceful in asking Israel to vacate the occupied territories. This concept enunciates that big international companies and corporations that are exploring the natural resources and building and often dismantling infrastructure in the occupied territories are stronger than the governments of their respective countries.

Latest Battle between Hamas and Israel (12 Jun to 26 Aug 2014)

The reason for the situation getting out of control was the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers, who were latter murdered and their bodies were found near Hebron. In retaliation to this, anti -Palestinian riots took place, in which a teenager was murdered for revenge and the situation further escalated and assumed disproportionate dimensions. The total losses were estimated to be 2143 Palestinians; 66 Israeli soldiers and 05 civilians. A total of 17000 homes were completely destroyed and 30000 were partially destroyed in Gaza. The cost of reconstruction was estimated at \$ 7.8 billion, which is three times the GDP of Gaza. A total of 32 tunnels were destroyed by Israel, which was estimated to be bringing in \$ 700 million into Gaza's economy through goods and services.

Conclusion

Finally, though a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel was announced on 26 Aug 2014, it is yet to be seen how long it can last. All eyes will now be on the united front of Fatah and Hamas, who plan to hold elections by the year end. Unless the new regime, as and when it comes into power is conciliatory towards Israel right to exist and believes in a two nation theory, this violence may never end. The emergence of ISSI power is adding another dimension to the Middle East mosaic. USA and NATO forces are conscious of the overall repercussions and that is why they have commenced air operations to contain the growing influence of ISSI.