

The Gaza misadventure and its aftermath

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THE seismic impact of the recent 22-day Gaza war, while exposing the vulnerability of the Middle Eastern order, has created a new strategic reality, accentuating the urgency of the Arab-Israeli peace process. The purpose of the well planned, barbaric but fruitless Israeli onslaught was to extirpate Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, from Gaza. Below is a brief analysis of the political maneuvering during the conflict, the brunt of which was borne by the battered civilian Palestinians, and its aftermath which is perceived to be more threatening than the war itself.

If the measure of victory in a war is the magnitude of the havoc wreaked, then Israel has definitely won it; at the moral level, however, it is Hamas -- a case of triumph of "mind over matter." The fact that it is very much in control of Gaza, even after three weeks of pounding from the most powerful regional military (employing aircrafts, gunships, drones, warships, artillery, tanks, phosphorus agent, bunker busters, etc.), makes it victorious. In order to win the war, it only needed to survive, which it has not only managed to do, but has done so with an enhanced popularity in the region, including the Fatah-administered West Bank. In the eyes of the Palestinians and the Arab streets, Hamas has stood up to Israel, whereas Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah group have been largely discredited, for not only failing to extract concessions from Israel for the Palestinians, but for appearing as its puppets, which is not far from the truth.

The onslaught was expected to boost the chances of the Israeli government's coalition partners in the upcoming general elections, contest between who has been able to prove their hawkish credentials to the electorate at the cost of innocent Palestinians. The beneficiary of this war is likely to be Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative Likud Party, well-known for its undisguised disdain for the peace process, and preference for putting it in

"formaldehyde." However, not all Israelis have been supportive of their government's sordid operation in Gaza, which slaughtered 1400 lives. One prominent Israeli peace activist lamented that, "...[O]ur conduct here in the region has, for a long time, been flawed, immoral and unwise."

Contrary to the claims of the neoconservatives, Israel was not fighting a proxy war against Iran in Gaza; it was fighting against the Palestinians. Iran has so far extended only financial, not military assistance to Hamas, and the political support it professed, was more rhetorical than real, despite anti-Israeli invectives forthcoming from its leaders. Besides, it had an interest in not jeopardizing the nascent normalization process between Iran and the Obama administration, by engaging in direct confrontation with Israel. According to one analyst, "Iran's relationship with Hamas is a marriage of convenience at best." In fact Iran's priority at the moment is managing the Arab reaction to any future Iran-US rapprochement, rather than complicating the process.

Likewise, Syria's politically sound but logistically ineffective response to the Gaza tragedy was considerably informed by the prospective diplomatic breakthrough with the new US administration. (This, however, does not prevent it from capitalising on Israel's failure in Gaza). Hezbollah, the Syrian-backed Iranian ally, while expressing solidarity with Hamas, showed restraint by only inveighing against Israel. It was mindful of its own political ascendancy in Lebanese politics, which it did not want to imperil by opening a second front in southern Lebanon.

Initial support for the Israeli mauling of pro-Iran Hamas was implicit in Saudi Arabia and Egypt's silence, and their spurning of Qatar's call for an emergency Arab League summit at the outbreak of hostilities. Saudi largesse of US\$1 billion was subsequently pledged for reconstruction, but only after the massive destruction of Gaza's civilian infrastructure. Suppression of Hamas was also



expected by Cairo to restrain the Muslim Brotherhood-led opposition.

The debilitating division of the Arab world between the so-called "moderates," Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, and the "extremists," Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, (which the Bush administration so skillfully sought to foster by projecting the spectre of Shi'a threat emanating from a rising Iran), was instrumental in prolonging and aggravating the misery of the hapless Gaza residents. The bizarre logic of the situation compelled the "moderates" to regard Israel as the "lesser evil," in the region, and cooperate with it, an otherwise improbable occurrence.

Excepting for the abstention from vetoing the January 8 UN Security

Council cease-fire resolution, the outgoing Bush administration extended vital political, diplomatic, military and moral support to the Israeli mission of eliminating Hamas, accused to be a purveyor of terror. The latest outbreak of violence has been attributed to its eight-year neglect of the Mideast peace process, and the marginalization of Hamas through economic sanctions and blockade, while supporting the pliant Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. (It may be mentioned that, in the late 1970s and 80s, Hamas, an offshoot of Egypt's Islamic Brotherhood, had tacit Israeli and American support for offsetting the role of late Yassir Arafat's secular faction).

The new Obama administration, though hamstrung by the Gaza war, needs

to eschew its predecessor's divide and rule policy of driving a wedge between the Hamas and Fatah, and splitting the regional countries along spurious ideological/sectarian lines, and work toward a just, comprehensive and durable peace in the region. It may begin by dismantling the term "axis of evil," normalizing relations with Iran and Syria, engaging Hamas and bringing it, without any precondition, onboard the peace process -- which, otherwise may appear as Banquo's ghost at the negotiating table. For all its rhetoric, it is far more pragmatic in its approach toward Israel (and not really intent on "destroying" it), willing to negotiate with it, and most importantly, is not an Iranian proxy. If it were really such a disruptive force, it would have boy-

cotted the 1993 Oslo Accord-stipulated 2006 elections. It has been suggested that the new Obama administration could show prudence by "incentivizing" this under-appreciated pragmatic aspect of Hamas, for ushering in peace and stability in the region.

If President Obama is truly committed to the mantra of change, he has to achieve that in the US "Israel First" Mideast policy as well, questioning which is almost regarded to be an act of sacrilege. It remains to be seen to what extent the newly appointed US envoy for this volatile region, Senator George Mitchell, reputed to be even-handed and optimistic about resolving conflicts, can succeed in this regard.

It must be recognized that the key to a broader Middle East settlement is the resolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict. At the moment Palestinian national unity is imperative, without which genuine peace would continue to be elusive, leading to the unraveling of the tenuous, non-negotiated truce, and the resumption of yet another round of carnage, the victims of which would again be the defenseless Palestinian people. For Israel, the alternative to the peace process is, either the reoccupation of Gaza, or ethnic cleansing, neither of which is a realistic option. The Arab leaders too need to overcome their disarray and division if they are to play a constructive role in regional politics; failure to do which may incur them the wrath of their own people, render their regimes insecure, and further complicate the political scenario.

The bottom line is that, the intractable Palestine-Israel conflict cannot be solved militarily, but through a negotiated and inclusive peace deal acceptable and satisfying for all the parties concerned. Otherwise, there could be further escalation of conflict, polarization and radicalization of the region, which would not only affect the security of Israel's Arab allies, but of Israel itself and, in the long run, that of the United States' too.

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The geostrategic scenario of Bangladesh-Part II

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INDIA is Bangladesh's closest neighbour. India shares its longest border (2,840 km) with Bangladesh. Although the border is demarcated, there are a few unresolved issues such as enclaves and adverse possessed lands - legacy from the colonial past. The issue of water sharing of common rivers, especially of the Ganges and the barrage built across it in Farakka, West Bengal had been the greatest irritant. Some issues remain unresolved mainly due to bureaucratic dillydallying and political backsliding. More recently, the maritime boundary issues have come up. The position of the two countries on this issue is not too divergent and given the political will, the issue could be resolved to the satisfaction of both the parties. Arms and drugs smuggling, human trafficking, movement of criminals and extremist elements across the border are of common concern to both the countries. Thankfully, these issues are receiving due attention of both the governments.

India is one of Bangladesh's largest trading partners and a fast growing export destination. There is also a bright prospect of Indian investment in Bangladesh economy. She had long been seeking direct road and rail access to the northeastern states through Bangladesh, thus avoiding the circuitous route through the Shiliguri Corridor. Some quarters within Bangladesh felt that allowing transit rights to India would amount to surrendering national sovereignty. These critics, of course, cannot explain why sovereignty is threatened in case of road or rail transit, but not in case of river or air transit that already exist since Pakistan period. We need to devise a win-win situation where Bangladesh allows Indian transit on payment of appropriate toll, and in return, gains greater access into the huge Indian market. The Treaty could provide important advantage for Bangladesh in its relationship with India. The same could be said about the opening up of the Chittagong port for the NE states of India. The road, rail, and maritime link between Bangladesh and India, and then the rest of Asia will be a major source of earning and will attract huge investment and trade. Opening up of Chittagong port for external users will mean generating greater revenue that will provide for modernization and expansion of port facilities. In fact, additional traffic could further justify a deep-sea port near Chittagong. We have been pushing back for too long on Asian Rail and Highway networks that are planned to connect Bangladesh with the rest of Asia. The network aims to provide seamless access to goods and passengers traveling across frontiers as are done in Europe or the Americas. If the Government continues to drag its feet, the planned network will bypass Bangladesh and reach Assam, Myanmar and beyond through the Shiliguri Corridor.

Bangladesh-China Relations

China is a major trading partner of Bangladesh as well as a major supplier of her weapons and armament. While Bangladesh looks up to China as a strategic partner, China's response to such overture has been lukewarm at best. Chinese economic assistance while small in volume has been more visible, such as the Friendship Bridges. Bangladesh's response to the adverse trade with China has largely remained muted. However, in future, there is good prospect of balanced, two-way trade with China, especially if the road and rail link is established with eastern China and if road link could be established with Tibet via India. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, along with India, must continue its effort to dissuade China from damming the Brahmaputra for that would bring about a great human tragedy throughout Eastern India and Bangladesh. While China emerges as a global economic and military power, our close and intimate relation with her becomes a strategic necessity.



Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations

Bangladesh's attempt to foster close relationship with Myanmar had often been thwarted by the military junta in Yangon that had been keeping the country closed for five decades. Bangladesh had to take care of thousands of Rohingya Muslims refugees for decades who were pushed out of Myanmar. While the land boundary was demarcated in the '70s, the maritime boundaries between Bangladesh and Myanmar remain a potential source of conflict. Their respective claims are widely divergent on a piece of sea territory that is rich in energy and marine resources. The naval forces of Myanmar and Bangladesh came face to face in the Bay of Bengal in November 2008 after an

oil and gas exploration attempt by Myanmar in an area claimed by both the countries. Though the tension has been subsequently diffused the crisis is far from over. It is of utmost importance for Bangladesh to develop close and friendly relations with her neighbour while not compromising her vital national interest.

Bangladesh and SAARC

Bangladesh, as a proponent of regional cooperation, had always paid a leading role in SAARC. Yet there has not been a substantial progress in regional peace and amity, mainly due to India-Pakistan rivalry. The so-called SAARC spirit of cooperation and fraternity is looking frail today due to the simmering hostility between India and Pakistan. In the current crisis, the smaller member states of SAARC are only bystanders, unable to do anything to defuse the crisis. Despite the prevailing gloom, Bangladesh, along with other SAARC members, should continue efforts to better relations

special relationship with the members of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) needed to be mentioned. The Gulf Arab states are important as a source for our energy resources. They are also vital to our economic wellbeing because of the remittance that we receive from our workers in the region. The downside of our relations with the Gulf States has been an inflow of extremist religious ideologies that originate there and are officially patronised by some of these states. Bangladesh is an active member of the UN and its many agencies. It is one of the largest contributors of military and police forces to the worldwide Peace Keeping Operations (PKO). High degree of professionalism shown by our forces around the world had earned admiration of the world community.

Geostrategic Priorities
As we near the end of the first decade into the 21st century, we need to reassess our geostrategic challenges and prospects for the future. Some of the national priorities can be tabulated as follows:

- Allocate more resources for education. Ensure that the resources are spent to produce enlightened citizen fit to meet the challenges of our time.
- Attract foreign and domestic investment and expand our export basket. Encourage investment from China and India to raise their stake in the welfare of Bangladesh. Seek additional market access into those countries.
- Improve border relations with neighbours. Demarcate land boundary and settle enclave issues. Effectively check human, drugs and arms trafficking.
- Create a Counter Terrorism Operations Centre, manned by security personnel from all South Asian countries, to fight the scourge of terrorism jointly.
- Ensure that no country's territory is used to harbour terrorists or to train them to launch attack on another country. Ensure accountability of intelligence agencies to their respective governments.
- Enter into Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway network. Initiate discussion with India regarding surface transit, port and airport facilities. Ensure that it is a win-win situation for all parties involved.
- Negotiate with India on sharing of water of all common rivers. Create public opinion within India, especially in Assam, against Tipaimukh Dam. Along with India, try to dissuade China from damming and diverting Brahmaputra River.
- Develop a South Asian Power Grid to interconnect countries of the region so that electricity can be purchased and sold across the frontiers like any other commodity.
- Enter into dialogue with India and Myanmar on the delimitation of Maritime boundary. Revive talks on Myanmar-Bangladesh-India Gas Pipeline Project with the provision of Bangladesh tapping onto the gas supplies when needed.

between the two major partners. The problems facing the SAARC countries can be best faced regionally be it terrorism, poverty reduction, climate change or job creation. Bangladesh, having excellent relation with all member states, could be a catalyst for future cooperation within SAARC.

Bangladesh and the World
Bangladesh maintains close diplomatic and economic links with North America and the EU. These two regions are the major destination of our export and are important sources of development assistance. We have a special relationship with the UK within Commonwealth. Our relationship with Japan, Korea and the countries in Southeast Asia are very important for trade, commerce, investment and economic assistance. Bangladesh's

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Let the victor surrender to the people

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THE good side of the political change-over is that an elected government has taken over from the overstaying caretakers; the bad side of it however is that the opposition has been virtually wiped out. As a result, along with the nation, Awami League was also stunned by the result and refused to celebrate. Democracy's indispensable institution -- the opposition -- the check or brake, is missing. The emerging democratic order has virtually wiped out the 'government in waiting'. The Grand Alliance is a vote-catching billboard, every inch of it depends on the acumen of the ruling Awami League leadership and how they are going to steer through without an effective opposition. Without the culture of collective leadership, the very fundamental of parliamentary democracy, everything depends on Sheikh Hasina. She is the all-powerful Prime Minister, president of the Awami League, leader of the alliance and the leader of the House. Overwhelming concentration of power in one hand usually produces arrogant leadership and goes against the spirit of parliamentary democracy.

The number game is going to be a dangerous postulation; it would be amateurish to think the voice of the opposition is feeble and worthless; it still represents a segment of people not permanently aligned to any party. All effort should be to encourage the opposition and all ears should be ready to hear them. The arrogance of number will undesirably force the opposition on the street. Bangladesh has disturbing records of rewarding the parties on the street more than for the constructive role in the parliament. After election-2001, one could count on the fingers the number of days the opposition attended parliament. They are yet to return the pay and benefits unethically drawn from the taxpayers' money for long five years of no work. They may have their reasons but these are not good records of parliamentary politics. The Awami League must not humble the opposition with the weight of their overwhelming victory and be ready to absorb lot of egotism from the vanquished.

Not everything can be right with the government because they have to work and make hard decisions. The leadership must demonstrate visible courage in accepting constructive suggestions from all shades and be aware of sycophants from within. The new faces in the cabinet are encouraging, let us hope they will be able to sustain the goodwill of the people with honest and dedicated public service. Honesty is a matter of taste and habit; one does not have to make extraordinary sacrifices to be honest. In the government, with a lot of authority and scope for misusing it, greed control should be the primary focus of the leadership. If leaders remain honest, the bureaucracy and others can be caped from their habitual loose hands. Honesty has to start from the cabinet. Motia Chowdhury, the only surviving cabinet minister of the earlier government can inspire others.

The energy sector has reached a crisis level. If there is no energy, no wheel moves, no production, no distribution and no job. Sitting on the crisis is more dangerous than higher energy cost to attract foreign investment in this vital sector. We cannot afford to have artificially low price structure isolated

from the world market. The poor may have to be subsidised. The government has to deliver quickly in the economic front with special attention to the poor and vulnerable. The strategy should be poverty alleviation rather than drumming of onetime help to the poor.

An education reform in keeping with the needs of 21st century is long overdue. Education without scope of employment is the cause of the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh. The terrorist tinge is due primarily to the international upsurge among the unhappy Muslims. It needs compassion and understanding to absolve west hate disease among the unemployed and unhappy Muslim youth. All effort should be for the employment opportunity of the youth for a respectable living. If we can provide employment, the ghetto conspiracies of the mean-streets, at the most, will have drawing room storms in tea parties.

This government cannot possibly afford extended honeymoon to address faltering economic indicators. Rather than go back to the blame game, it would be best to open the door for the foreign investment with an attractive package. They come to make money and we get the job here. Why else shall the investors come? We are not directly affected by the on going global economic turmoil, but we are not entirely safe from the meltdown effect. Less remittance from the expatriates and less export is going to hurt Bangladesh in the coming days. External aid flow will shrink; we will have to put up efficiency and honesty to attract institutional and overseas private sector borrowing. Snail speed of decision-making and corruption is a disincentive for the foreign investors. The tall list of election promises may be hard to deliver, but asking people to forget election promises will be harder to achieve. Politics is also a game of patience; the BNP will be the choice of the people in the next election if the promises remain undelivered.

Trial of war criminals has been blown into an election agenda that Awami League failed to carry out in the seventies. It has now politically sold to the people as the twin track of ongoing terrorist activities. War criminals are the trigger end, but the alarming issue is the rise of terrorism that is hiding in the simple faith. Bangladesh cannot remain hostage of the past issues anymore; the present government has a responsibility to set the war criminal issue and all issues of '71 at rest forever.

Most of the countries have religion-based parties with small followings. Nothing is wrong as long as fundamentalists follow the discipline of democratic politics. Nobody should take law in his or her hand the way Bangla Bhai did. The government must enforce law and maintain order first, to give a simultaneous boost to the economy.

The home minister and all ministers must be careful with the media even if provoked, or cannot forget the past treatment. Revenge is a mean human trait, forgetting it not forgiving is angelic. When people vote for a government, they want their leaders to be angels. You have to forget the revenge to remember the commitments you made to the people. A government cannot do everything in five years, but the priority of the people must come first. We hope that the rulers will not suffer from the delirium of the massive victory.

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