

## Can there be peace under Netanyahu's government?



Ramisa Rob  
is a journalist at The Daily Star.

RAMISA ROB

Israel's catastrophic war on terror, after the Hamas attack, has reopened a bloody chapter of the region's conflict-ridden history. Global double standards are unravelling in front of our eyes, costing innocent lives in Gaza. The latest Netanyahu coalition government – waging this virulent response, displacing millions and killing thousands of Palestinians – is the most extremist government in Israel's history. The unsparing attacks on Palestinian lives require a historical understanding of Israel's gradual shift to far-right extremism, which serves as context to assess the possible consequences of the aggravating situation.

In a six-day war in 1967, after a series of manoeuvres by Egyptian President Nasser, Israel shocked the world by occupying the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Since the occupation, the "two-state solution" has been touted by the West like a broken record, detached from the Israeli domestic environment, and the anti-democratic foundations of Israel. Till date, Israel has not adopted a constitution or equality laws as was required by the UN Resolution 181, the partition plan that caused the first mass displacement of Palestinians.

Many political analysts still believe the only possibility of the "two-state solution" was reflected in the Oslo Accords of 1993 – the peace agreement brokered by former US President Bill Clinton, and signed by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat. The accords promised to create an independent state for Palestinians in five years, which never happened. There's a catch though: until Oslo, the international consensus supported complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Essentially, PLO's agreement to the Oslo terms legitimised Israel's illegal pretence of possessing "existing rights" in the occupied territories. Even after peace negotiations, as Nobel Peace Prizes were handed out, Israel's government continued to engage in mass arrests of Palestinians without reason.

Then in 1995, Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated by an ultra-nationalist Israeli who opposed the peace initiative. Current leader Benjamin Netanyahu – the leader of the Likud Party at the time – was blamed for ignoring the incitement of extremists – a charge he has vociferously denied. Rabin's assassination marked a turning point in maturing the ultra-nationalism



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

reflected in the coalition today.

Previously, extremism was a persistent problem lurking in the fringes in Israel since its inception. Yet the fascist turn was anticipated by prominent intellectuals like Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt in the wake of the 1948 Deir Yassin Massacre, where they publicly criticised Herut, Likud Party's predecessor, as "akin in its organisation, methods and political philosophy and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist Parties."

When Netanyahu first became prime minister in 1996, he demonised Rabin's efforts to compromise with Palestine, and groomed a generation of extremist leaders, such as Avigdor Lieberman, who called for the expulsion of 1.3 million "Arabs of Israel" in 2004. But Netanyahu has been a hawkish politician driven by self-interest over anything else. While appeasing his anti-Palestine national religious voters, Netanyahu also attempted an interim revival of the Oslo Accords to proclaim a farcical commitment to the two-state solution.

The Israeli government's predictable anti-terrorism rhetoric being used to wage war today, in which Palestinian terrorism is always the cause but never the effect of evil, has also played like a broken record over the past two decades. In 1998, Netanyahu and Arafat signed the Wye River Memorandum in Maryland, to facilitate Israeli

withdrawals in the West Bank, on the condition that Palestine executes a specific "action plan" to combat terrorism. In this "struggle between good and evil, the more repression the better: any restraints will impede the struggle," as Jewish Professor Norman Finkelstein wrote in 1998, criticising the Wye River Memorandum as "securing occupation."

The sincerity of the 1998 Wye

Prior to elections in 2022, facing indictments on corruption charges, after 18 months of exile, Netanyahu cultivated relationships with fascist-religious parties. Netanyahu's appointment of extremist leader Itamar Ben Gvir – who was among a group of extremists indicted for celebrating the stabbing of a Palestinian baby by a settler extremist – as minister of national security drew widespread domestic criticism. Netanyahu's own repressive tendencies pale in comparison to his appointees, such as the currently appointed Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who is widely recognised as a "bona-fide Jewish fascist."

Months prior to the Hamas attack, Netanyahu's latest government led a judicial coup amid public outrage, snubbing the Supreme Court's power to intervene in governance. And only four days before the Hamas attack, Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published an editorial on how Israel's neo-fascism threatens Israelis and Palestinians alike.

The prospects of peaceful resolution are far unless Israel is left without fallback options. Normalisation of Israel's government with Arab states, which the US recently brokered, is a tried-and-tested method that has extensively failed before to improve the conditions for Palestinians. For a realistic peace agreement, Israel's current far-right government has to be forced to make a compromise by its long-standing allies, most importantly, the US.

Previous US administrations though were able to pressure Israel. Following the 1956 Suez Crisis, President Eisenhower threatened economic sanctions to force Israel to withdraw from Gaza and Sinai. In 1977, President Carter threatened to terminate US military assistance to Israel if the nation did not evacuate Lebanon and secured an agreement between long-time enemies Egypt and Israel. And the last time in 1991, the US Secretary of State James Baker rebuked Israel's far-right government's hard-line approach that eschewed dialogue with Palestine.

Today the scope for accountability is moot. President Biden, who claims the US is a democracy champion, is supporting an outright authoritarian regime in Israel. The US vetoed the adoption of a humanitarian pause, essentially allowing bloodshed to continue. In 1986, Biden said in Congress, "if it were not for Israel, the US would have to invent an Israel to protect its interests in the Middle East." The US' position as a global superpower currently dwindles with the rise of China, and as such, its own agenda in protecting Israel as an ally – even at the cost of providing military funds to a fascist government embracing militant Zionism – matter more to its national interest, than being on the right side of history.

## Implications of the Israel-Palestine conflict for Bangladesh

An American perspective



Michael Kugelmann  
is director of the South Asia  
Institute at the Wilson Center in  
Washington, DC.

MICHAEL KUGELMANN

The Israel-Hamas war, now in its third week, broke out at a time when global geopolitics were already caught amid multiple black swans – a term famously coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb referring to wholly unseen events with massive ripple effects.

Due to the prevailing conflict in the Middle East of recent decades, this new war is not a total shock. But it is still difficult to grapple with Israel's massive intelligence failure, the horrific scale of Hamas' terrorism on October 7, the uncompromisingly brutal Israeli retaliation and, above all, the immense human toll.

Many countries will be affected, even if indirectly, by the war. There will be economic implications, especially global oil price spikes and impacts on energy trade. There will be security implications, from terrorism threats to public unrest sparked by large protests.

The jury is still out on the conflict's geopolitical impacts, but so far this much is true: Washington – and many of its allies and partners – won't be advantaged by a long war. The conflict has upended a new US vision of the Middle East, which revolves around a region that becomes a locus for trade, connectivity, and infrastructure development with deeper links to Europe and South Asia. Washington wants to operationalise that vision by stitching together new integrative mechanisms – from the India-Israel-UAE-US quad to the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

These initiatives require stability and cooperation to succeed. The war delivers a tragic reminder that both remain elusive.

It has diverted Washington's attention away from the Indo-Pacific and prompted the Biden administration to strengthen its force posture in the Mideast. This shift may rekindle longstanding doubts in many Indo-Pacific capitals about Washington's true commitment to a rebalanced region – and risks undermining recent progress towards the implementation of a US Indo-Pacific strategy.

On the other hand, with Washington and many of its European and Asian allies focused laser-like on the conflict, Moscow and Beijing will have opportunities to test a distracted Washington in Ukraine, or in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, respectively. Meanwhile, Iran benefits because the war ends any immediate chances of new normalisation agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbours linked to the Abraham Accords, which Tehran has long rejected.

US competitors can further exploit the rage that has erupted against the nation in the Middle East and beyond regarding Washington's firm backing of Israel's pursuit of war, despite Israel's brutal tactics against Palestinian civilians. They can point to this as another egregious case of the US failing to uphold its oft-stated intention to champion moral causes abroad.

All this said, the war has generated far more solidarity among Western capitals than has been the case with their reactions to the provocations of Russia or China. Many of them still depend on energy imports from Moscow and broader trade with Beijing.

The fact that India has embraced the West's position helps the West. New Delhi will further strengthen a relationship with Israel, which has been expanding for years, especially during Narendra Modi's regime.

Elsewhere in the Global South (and, to be sure, among large portions of the public in the West), reactions to the war have focused more on the plight of the Palestinians, the need for a cease-fire, and the imperative of a Palestinian state. These reactions are driven by various factors, depending on the country, such as a preference to side with the perceived strongest moral position; a lack of formal ties with Israel; deep historical links to the Palestinians, especially through the Non-Aligned Movement; and, in the Global South's many nonaligned capitals, a desire to avoid taking a position espoused by many within the Western alliance system.

Consequently, the war could deepen policy divides not only between the West and the Muslim world, but also between the West and the Global South. The latter schism is already considerable, due to triggers ranging from climate change mitigation financing to patent rights for pharmaceuticals.

Where does this all leave Bangladesh? Dhaka has emphasised the need for an "urgent ceasefire" and co-sponsored an ultimately unsuccessful UN Security Council resolution calling for an end to hostilities. Like so many countries, Bangladesh gains little from a long war, especially because of the deleterious economic implications – and these will become even more serious if it expands into a regional conflict. Bangladesh relies heavily on oil from the Gulf, and the Middle East is a key destination for its textile exports. The country's central bank data from earlier this year showed that two thirds of Bangladesh out-migration was to the Middle East, and that the Gulf region accounted for, by far, the largest source of remittances to Bangladesh.

Another ominous development for Dhaka is that the war is intensifying great power rivalry. Russia and China have thrown their support behind the Palestinians (even though both still have cordial relations with Israel). This will also bring them closer to Iran – another US rival. Washington and New Delhi are seemingly lining up on one side of the conflict, and Beijing and Moscow on the other. This new fault line means geopolitical competition will grow even fiercer, exacerbating Bangladesh's challenge of balancing its relations with all four countries.

With Washington focused intently on the war, and also facing allegations of moral hypocrisy for failing to object to Israel's brutalities – some experts calling them war crimes – against Palestinians, Dhaka might have hoped it would get a respite from the Biden administration's relentless pressure campaign on rights and democracy in Bangladesh. But it wasn't meant to be. Last week, a senior US official, Alfreem Akhter, visited Dhaka and reiterated longstanding US messaging about the importance of free and fair elections.

Clearly, even amid the war and so much global churn, some things have remained the same. That includes Washington's ongoing efforts to make Bangladesh a core focus of its values-based foreign policy.

## Problems with US response to the Gaza crisis



Shamsuddoza Sajen  
is a journalist and researcher.  
He can be contacted at  
sajen1986@gmail.com

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

On October 18, US President Joe Biden travelled to Israel, offering support for its military operations in the Gaza Strip, despite growing global calls for a ceasefire. The visit wasn't just a show of support; it represented a deliberate choice of words that acknowledged one side while overlooking the other. In subsequent press statements, the US president adopted a narrative that appeared to dehumanise the Palestinians and justify ongoing violence against them. He emphasised Israel's right to self-defense against the "evil" Hamas movement, even drawing comparisons to ISIS. But he failed to recognise the suffering experienced by the unarmed Gaza residents who have borne the weight of Israeli attacks, in addition to the decades-long occupation faced by the Palestinian people living under the Israeli apartheid state. Regrettably, the overall US response to the Gaza crisis thus far has been plagued by this oversimplified hypocrisy.

President Biden's unwavering support for Israel didn't stop there. He sent two aircraft carriers to the Eastern Mediterranean and pledged



A young boy looks on as people check the debris of a building destroyed in an Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP

\$14 billion in assistance, in addition to the substantial annual military aid. While Biden argued that this would bolster Israel's security, analysts and critics fear it may heighten instability

in the Middle East, prolonging the cycle of conflict and complicating long-term prospects for peaceful coexistence between Israel and Palestine further. This approach also appears contradictory to the US' call for preventing the crisis from engulfing the broader region.

Perhaps the most striking contradiction was President Biden's call for Israel to avoid harming

"humanitarian pauses" to deliver aid to the Gaza Strip, implement a ceasefire, and lift restrictions on civilians leaving the northern part of the besieged territory.

Due to its unquestioned and one-sided stance, the US has been unable to fulfil its often-boasted goal of promoting peace in the Middle East. This is the very reason why Israeli leaders have remained largely impervious to US paternalism regarding the Palestinian issue. Israelis have welcomed America's support and financial aid without conceding to calls for a resolution.

The two-state "peace process," a staple championed by the United States since the 1970s, has come to resemble more of a "piece process" in reality, as pointed out by Professor Donald Earl Collins. The US' clear bias in favour of Israel has emboldened the latter to exert control over and annex Palestinian territory with impunity. Each time Israel expands its illegal settlements, Washington expresses being "deeply troubled" by Israeli actions but consistently opposes UN initiatives aimed at condemning Israeli policies.

In the current context, the persistent assaults on unarmed Gaza civilians and the extensive preparations for a ground invasion serve as stark evidence that President Biden's warning against Gaza reoccupation, which he labelled a "big mistake," has fallen on deaf ears. The US' failure to condemn and prevent the Israeli atrocity in Gaza will make it complicit in the ongoing killing of the Palestinians.

Palestinian civilians while facilitating humanitarian aid into Gaza, and the US exercising its veto power at the UN Security Council. It blocked a resolution that called for