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Israeli-Palestine Conflict: Compromise and Restraint Needed

By Ong Keng Yong

Synopsis

Washington's controversial recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has refocused attention on the long-running dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians, who see the eastern part of the city as the capital of their future state. Singapore must patiently and skilfully manage its relations with both sides.

Commentary

ON 23 DECEMBER 2016, the 15-member United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 2334 with a vote of 14–0. China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia and New Zealand were among those who voted in favour of it. The United States abstained.

Resolution 2334 reaffirms that “the establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-state solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace”. The resolution demands that “Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem”.

Significance of Resolution 2334

This is the first UNSC Resolution on Israeli settlements to be adopted in almost 37 years. While it did not include any sanction or coercive measure and was adopted under non-binding provisions of the United Nations (UN) Charter, Israeli newspaper Haaretz stated it “may have serious ramifications for Israel in general and specifically for the settlement enterprise” in the medium- to long-term.

The Israeli government accused the administration of US President Barack Obama of orchestrating the passage of Resolution 2334. Israel subsequently retaliated with a series of diplomatic actions against some members of the UNSC.

In international law, there is the Fourth Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 which makes it illegal for nations to move their own civilian populations and establish settlements in territories acquired in a war. A majority of UN member states consider the Israeli settlements to be illegal on that basis.

On the other hand, Israel takes the view that these are not “occupied” but “disputed” territories because “there were no established sovereigns in the West Bank or Gaza Strip prior to the Six-Day War” in 1967. This Israeli argument was rejected by the International Court of Justice in 2004.

What’s at Stake

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is regarded as the most intractable dispute confronting the world today. In the early years, it was simply described as the fight between the Arabs and the Jews. Over the decades, the Israeli and Palestinian dimensions were cast as the international community tried to narrow the wide-ranging conflict and focused on the main protagonists and the key possible solution.

This involves the creation of two states: Israel and Palestine, existing side-by-side. Many scholars have characterised the conflict as a fight for control of land in what is today’s Israel, the West Bank of the Jordan River and the Gaza Strip facing the Mediterranean Sea. Others consider it a battle between Islam and Judaism as the respective holy places are in the contested area.

To further complicate the situation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also seen as a proxy of big power competition for domination of a vital part of the world’s geography. Western powers, led by the US, have been locked in a contest for influence and alliances in the Middle East.

The Cold War atmospherics compounded the emotional, ethnic and religious elements of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle and often heightened tensions, leading to armed hostilities in the occupied territories as well as terrorist attacks inside Israel. The rich oil and gas resources in the region and the strategic sea lanes connecting the Middle East with Europe, Africa and Asia make this region critical to the interests of the big powers.

Overall, it has resulted in the prolonged state of war and human suffering in what historians call the Fertile Crescent (stretching from the eastern Mediterranean coast to the land fed by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and onwards to the Persian Gulf). The turmoil in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq as well as the rise of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other terror groups can be linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in one way or another.

Indeed, many experts have argued that much of the trouble in the Islamic world and

between Muslim and non-Muslim communities around the globe today can be traced to the deep-seated differences underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Singapore's Position

In a reply to parliamentary questions on 14 January 2013, Singapore's then Minister for Foreign Affairs, K. Shanmugam, provided a concise picture of Singapore's stand on the issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He reiterated the country's support for the right of the Palestinian people to a homeland. Singapore had previously issued a statement welcoming the proclamation of a Palestinian state in 1988.

The minister pointed out that there were approximately 19 resolutions on various Palestinian-related issues tabled each year at the UN General Assembly. Singapore had consistently voted in favour of all of them. Mr Shanmugam said that Singapore abstained on certain votes for specific UN resolutions to maintain a consistent principled position.

For example, Singapore believed that only a negotiated settlement consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 242 (adopted in 1967) could provide the basis for a viable, long-term solution. Resolution 242 called for the "establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East" that should include the "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict".

Mr Shanmugam stressed that both Israel and Palestine had legitimate rights and shared responsibilities. They must both be prepared to make compromises in order to achieve a lasting peace. Any unilateral action, be it by Israel or Palestine, to force a settlement of the issue would hinder, rather than facilitate, the peace process.

Principles of International Law

According to Mr Shanmugam, Singapore's position on Palestinian statehood is based on certain principles and international law. As with all resolutions tabled at the UN, Singapore would vote based on its own national interests as an independent and sovereign nation, regardless of the position of others.

He pointed out that Singapore's position on this issue is well known to all parties and has not affected its close ties with ASEAN member states. ASEAN leaders had called on all parties to return to the negotiation table and resolve the conflict in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions.

Mr Shanmugam added that Singapore has been contributing to Palestine's development primarily through technical assistance under the Singapore Cooperation Programme, training Palestinian officials in fields that Singapore is strong in, such as public administration and urban planning. The Singapore government believes this is the best way for Singapore to make a difference to Palestine's development.

Singapore had also made voluntary monetary contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Most recently, on 20 February 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated Singapore's long-standing and consistent position on the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including Singapore's support for Israel's right to live within secure borders and in peace, and also the right of the Palestinian people to a homeland.

He called for restraint and compromise on both sides in order to achieve a lasting peace. He expressed Singapore's hope that the Israelis and the Palestinians would resume direct negotiation to find a just, durable and comprehensive solution to this longstanding conflict. PM Lee's policy statement was made during the official visit of Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu to Singapore in February.

Looking Ahead

The two-state solution is favoured by most member states of the UN, international bodies around the world and people in Israel and the West Bank/Gaza Strip. At the same time, the Israeli government demands recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and guarantee for its security.

The gap between the two positions is huge. In the circumstances, no quick resolution of the dispute is imminent. Singapore must manage its relations with both Israel and Palestine patiently and skilfully.

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