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Israel's 10/7 is Not its 9/11

By Amin Saikal

SYNOPSIS

Israel's labelling of the October 7 (10/7) Hamas attacks as its 9/11 and paralleling its response to that of the United States are misleading. The two events occurred under different circumstances with their own nature and intensity.

COMMENTARY

Israeli leaders have referred to the October 7 (10/7) Hamas attacks as their 9/11, an event which resulted in the US intervention in Afghanistan and wider "war on terror". The implication is that Israel is justified in responding to Hamas' assaults just as the US responded to the 9/11 attacks. Hence Israel's declared determination to eliminate Hamas no matter what the cost. However, a comparison of 10/7 with 9/11 is misplaced.

Israel's Earlier Reference to 9/11

The first time that the Israeli leadership drew on 9/11 to quell Palestinian resistance to occupation was during the government of former prime minister Ariel Sharon (2001-2006). Shortly after 9/11, it labelled Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the founding and spiritual leader of the Islamist Hamas, and Yasser Arafat, the secularist Palestinian Authority (PA) head, as equivalent, respectively, to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Taliban supremo Mullah Mohammad Omar. Backed by another strongman of the right-wing Likud Party, Benjamin Netanyahu, the government intimated that Israel was as much entitled to move against Hamas and PA leaders to incapacitate their resistance to Israeli occupation.

Consequently, Israel intensified its military operations in the occupied territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip. Sheikh Yassin was killed in an Israeli drone attack in March 2004. Arafat died, after being isolated for weeks by Israel, in a

hospital near Paris (where he was under medical treatment for an underlying disease that the French doctors could not determine) in November of that year. Sharon and Netanyahu had already rejected the Oslo Peace Accords of September 1993 in support of a two-state solution; Hamas had turned to violent actions in the absence of the creation of an independent Palestinian state within five years of the signing of the Accords; and one of the architects of the Accords, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, had been assassinated by an Israeli extremist in November 1995.

After Sharon's incapacitation following a stroke in 2006, Netanyahu advocated a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians based on "peace for peace", not "land for peace", as enshrined in the Oslo deals. In March 2015, he declared that there would be no Palestinian state on his watch.

Gaza Pullout

Indeed, Sharon pulled out of Gaza in 2005, largely because the place had become too costly and squalid for Israel to run. But he kept tight control over it from the land, air and sea. Meanwhile, Israel and its main backer, the US, insisted that the Palestinians should democratise their politics as a condition for progress towards a two-state solution. Yet, when Hamas won the 2006 parliamentary elections, Israel and the US rejected the outcome, vilifying Hamas as a "terrorist organisation".

In the ensuing split between the PA and Hamas and Hamas' takeover of Gaza in 2007, Israel imposed a comprehensive blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Israel has now once again recalled 9/11 as a reference to legitimise its response to Hamas' indefensible attacks under international law. But today's comparison is as inaccurate as that advanced by Sharon.

Differences Between the US and Israeli Responses

Afghanistan was not under US occupation or blockade prior to 9/11. Al Qaeda's attacks were planned by its leaders, especially Bin Laden, under protection of the extremist Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In retaliation, America's main objective was to dismantle Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime, and ensure that Afghanistan never again became a hub for terrorist groups.

America's Afghanistan campaign did not amount to an invasion but rather an intervention. It was backed by the United Nations and most of the countries around the world, including those in the Muslim domain. During its two-decade long intervention, the US did not drop more than 7,000 bombs in a four-week period that could kill more than 10,000 Afghan civilians, including many children. Nor did it at any time seek to deprive the population of Afghanistan of food, water, electricity, fuel and medicine or cause them mass dislocation. The US, along with its allies, provided an unprecedented amount of reconstruction, and humanitarian and security aid to ensure reasonable livelihoods for as many Afghans as possible.

The US also did not dislocate 1.5 million Afghans, and isolate Afghanistan from the rest of the world and conduct its operations in total darkness to hide the rate of casualties and destruction from the public eye. No UN Secretary-General ever

accused the US of collective punishment of Afghans in violation of international humanitarian law. Nor was the UN General Assembly ever prompted to vote for a humanitarian pause.

The US led a robust mission against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet, it was careful not to resort to the kinds of action that could alienate the Afghan people, Pakistan and the Muslim world. The images that emerged from the Afghanistan conflict were stressful but not overwhelming.

This does not mean that there was no humanitarian, political, developmental, moral and strategic failures. There were many. The US and its allies, including their protege Afghan governments, ultimately failed to achieve Washington's primary goal. As the war dragged on for too long and became very costly, with the chance of victory fading, the US finally bowed out in defeat, empowering the very forces that it had sought to eliminate: Al Qaeda-allied Taliban and their affiliates.

Given this, any comparison of Hamas' attacks with 9/11 is simply inaccurate, as is also Israel's retaliatory measures with America's response to 9/11. The current Israel-Hamas war is of a different nature and intensity.

Amin Saikal is Professor Emeritus of Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies at the Australian National University, and author of the forthcoming book, How to Lose a War: The Story of America's Intervention in Afghanistan, to be published by Yale University Press. He was a recent Visiting Distinguished Fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg