



The Plight of Gaza

Paul Hedges



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Plight of Gaza

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

The suffering of the people of Gaza increases daily as war continues and peace eludes them. The parties directly involved in the conflict and their respective supporters have failed to uphold the rules and requirements of international conventions governing the conduct of war and conflict resolution. Their behaviour reveals elements of antisemitism and Islamophobia. Government actions and public sentiment may undermine the potential for social cohesion and interreligious coexistence.

COMMENTARY

After the Israeli Security Council endorsed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan to invade Gaza City and [occupy the Gaza](#) Strip, the Israeli government has been set on a precarious path. The global public opinion is turning against Israel, and several Western leaders [have recognised](#) the state of Palestine. However, there are still many who have not desisted from backing Israel.

The UK government, for example, applied its terrorism laws to sanction Palestine Action, a UK-based protest group, whose members allegedly engaged in assaults on those against their cause and vandalised military equipment. The UK Parliament outlawed Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation. The British police arrested hundreds of peaceful protestors, including elderly individuals, who are appalled by what many perceive as genocide in Gaza. Police even [detained](#) a man with a satirical cartoon before being released in the massive crackdown.

Islamophobia in the West

The support for Israel could be read in the context of Islamophobia. Since the crusades and in colonial times, Europe has identified itself in [antagonism to Islam](#).

This still resonates today. Politicians such as Geert Wilders of the Netherlands have had increasing success with little policy other than opposition to Islam. In Donald Trump's first term as US President, he initially, if unsuccessfully, tried to implement what was identified as an Islamophobic travel ban, before cloaking it in a wider security framing to include non-Muslim majority countries and getting it passed. Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has recently had electoral success with a deeply Islamophobic platform.

The anti-migrant and Islamophobic rhetoric of former football hooligan Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (under the populist moniker Tommy Robinson) brought more than a hundred thousand protestors, including violent thugs, to London's streets recently. While antisemitism is also part of Europe's heritage and key to the far-right, with the AfD exemplifying both, some parties, such as France's Front Nationale (FN), have sought to play down antisemitism to become more electorally respectable. This is related both to the UK's Baroness Warsi defining Islamophobia as the last [respectable prejudice](#) and various right-wing groups aligning with the American right's hard support for Israel.

The United States Factor

The Global South has been almost unanimously [behind Palestine](#) for decades, but the United States' position as Israel's staunch ally has kept many Western nations in step with Israel.

That this is tied with Islamophobia may be seen in the Western support for Israel's attacks on Iran, which had US backing. Aggression against a Muslim majority state can be justified in the West as proportionate and legitimate, as they are considered inherently dangerous. Meanwhile, Israel's breach of international law does not stop it from being seen as upholding Western norms.

If Trump stays firm and avoids political upsets at home, Netanyahu may succeed in occupying the Gaza Strip. Members of Trump's cabinet have called for ethnic cleansing and Israeli occupation, which fits with the militant settler agenda. This would also fit with Trump's plan for a big [real estate](#) makeover on the land of the Palestinians.

No Matter the Palestinians

We must not ignore Western public outrage at Israel. Significant demonstrations in support of the Palestinians have occurred across North America, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. But in global geopolitics, this seems to [count for little](#). The Palestinian people who suffered the trauma of ethnic cleansing in the Nakba (Arabic word meaning "Catastrophe") of 1948, when a minimum estimated 750,000 were forced off their [ancestral lands](#) during the establishment of Israel, today face perhaps an even [greater threat](#) to their collective well-being and existence.

However, not only the United States, but also many European countries, and other supposed liberal democracies have continued to supply Israel with weapons. While the UK, France, and others have, belatedly, applied some sanctions on Israeli

individuals, and the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Netanyahu and his former Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, for war crimes, weapons flow unabated to Israel.

Even with an unprecedented level of deaths amongst children in the Gaza conflict, governments and [media outlets](#) in Western countries seem to focus more on the Israeli casualties. Israel does, of course, have a right to exist, and a right to self-defence, and Israel has long had the precarious position of being surrounded by hostile neighbours seeking to wipe it off the map. In this context, on the streets, [Islamophobic attacks](#) have gone up significantly since the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks on Israel, as have [antisemitic attacks](#); both Jews and Muslims have been subject to centuries of prejudice that is ongoing.

What Can We Do?

Despite the world watching Gaza, [war crimes](#) continue, and [potentially genocide](#) is unfolding before the world media. Public backlash and horror seem unable to seriously dissuade or deter many Western governments from backing Israel, other than the occasional display of sympathy for the wretched Palestinians. A de facto Israel takeover of Gaza, with Trump's America at its back, seems imminent.

History will judge the individuals and nations for the neglect of proportionality, the rule of law, and human decency. It is idealistic to believe that moral pressure can effect change. It may be a small comfort if history judges that atrocities occurred and some stood on the right side vis-à-vis the plight of Gaza.

In Singapore's context, there is less history and context of both [Islamophobia](#) and [antisemitism](#). However, global events can spill over into discord between communities, which may stretch beyond Jews and Muslims. While tensions may arise, transparency in the government's approach, clear language from community leaders, and a balanced approach that respects the dignity of all may help to ensure that overseas disputes do not irrevocably upset Singapore's social fabric.

Dr Paul Hedges is Professor of Interreligious Studies and Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, and a Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

