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Modi Avoids Over-Simplification of the Gaza Crisis But Fails to Communicate

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These days even in Bollywood, the villain is not entirely villainous nor the saint completely saintly. To depict one as THE villain and the other as THE victim in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be politically correct, prudent and popular, but is over simplification. Emotions and feelings are essential for human existence but very often, like the ideological blinkers, they tend to ignore uncomfortable facts. This pattern is once again visible in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict that has already consumed over a thousand lives, overwhelmingly of the Palestinians and largely non-combatants. Neither Israel nor Hamas can absolve themselves for the deaths of scores of civilians. But let there be no mistake. Sympathizing with Israel does not mean condoning occupation; and championing the Palestinian cause does not mean ignoring the militant tactics of Hamas. If the end justifies the means, then all are kosher in love and war.

Over simplification of the problem is what Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to avoid but being in office only for a few weeks, he messed it up. As a result, the NDA government angered friends and foes, both internally and externally and stunned seasoned observers. Indeed, none is happy with the stand taken by the Indian government over the ongoing violence.

What did the government try to do? At one level, it sought to underscore its willingness to maintain close ties with Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was one of the first world leaders to congratulate Modi within hours after early trends indicated a clear victory for the BJP.

Most Arab leaders were apparently stunned by the decimation of the Congress party or were busy elsewhere.

Hence, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was quick to dismiss any discussion in the parliament because Israel is a 'friend' and "no discourteous reference should be made to a friendly nation". Though she added that India is friendly towards both Israel and Palestine, the inference was unmistakable: Israel is a friend, something that all the previous Indian governments refused to admit in public, especially during violence periods. The initial rejection of the opposition demand for a discussion on the Gaza violence was a tactical mistake and diplomatic mis-step. It was not accidental that the opposition sought a discussion in the Rajya Sabha and not in the Lok Sabha whose members were also concerned about the situation. Given the numbers, the opposition demand would have been rejected by a voice vote in the lower house.

Hence, rather than being forced to concede in the end, the government should have initiated a discussion in both the houses of parliament and should have used the opportunity for a wider debate on the West Asia, spiral of violence carried out by various militant groups and their repercussion not only for the region but also for India. This would have enabled the government to highlight its commitments to the Palestinian cause while differentiating the Palestinian National Authority headed by Abbas from Hamas and its policies.

Secondly, too much is read into India's stand regarding the conflict in multilateral forums. The joint-declaration issued on July 15 at the end of the BRICS summit in Brazil endorsed "the two-State solution with a contiguous and economically viable Palestinian State existing side by side in peace with Israel, within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders based on the June 4, 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital." Though unilaterally declaring east Jerusalem as a capital of the Palestinian state without a Palestinian-Israeli agreement prejudices the negotiations, this is in line with the Indian stand in recent years.

The same holds true for the Indian vote in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). It voted with the majority on the Palestine-sponsored resolution that called for an "international commission of inquiry to investigate all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, particularly in the occupied Gaza Strip, in the context of the military operations conducted since 13 June 2014, and to report to the Council at its twenty-eighth session."

To describe the vote as a U-turn or conflicting signals, betrays the unfamiliarity of India's Israel policy since the normalization of the relations in January 1992. Having pursued a parallel track for over a decade, after the UPA came to power in 2004, India has been following a complex policy towards Israel: delinking the bilateral gains from the multilateral differences. Its friendly ties did not prevent India from criticizing Israel's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians; and likewise, differences over the peace process has not precluded India to pursue close ties, including military-security ties, with Israel. The reverse was the case before 1992; differences over the Palestine question prevented India from even having minimal diplomatic ties Israel. For a decade, India's bilateral relation flourishes despite political differences vis-à-vis peace process.

As a result, despite the normalization of relations and the tremendous progress in the political, economic, cultural and above all military relations, India has been coy on the international front. The notable exception was the August 2001 Durban Conference against racism, when India refused to join the Arab-Islamic chores that sought to resurrect and describe Zionism as racism. Otherwise, India has not supported Israel in major international forums, including the United Nations. This has been one of the pinpricks in the Indo-Israeli relations. Therefore, its refusal to side with Israel in the UNHRC merely indicates India's limitations in the international arena. Its great power aspirations demand New Delhi to be a part of wider consensus on major international issues and hence, it is not prepared to move away from the prevailing anti-Israeli international climate. On the UNHRC vote for example, only the US voted against while 29 voted in favour and 17 abstained. Some have suggested India should have abstained rather than voting for the resolution to signal its 'independent' and 'equidistance' position. This might happen in future but at least for now, Modi is not prepared to draw undue attention by moving faster on the most serious problem facing the world.

Three, despite its nomenclature, the UNHRC is a political body driven by partisan agenda and compulsions and should not be taken seriously, especially by those earnestly espousing human rights and humane values. Indeed, the current members of the UNHRC include Cuba, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, UAE and Venezuela. The human right records of some these countries are akin to naming a butcher as Blue Cross president!

Four, if India's words are to be influential they should be spoken wisely. Making fierce statements and demonizing Hamas or Israel, might win brownie points, accolades from the cadre and headlines in partisan media. These are not the way to promote one's interest or international

relevance. As they say in human relations, never abuse a person if you want to do business him the day after. Whether one likes or not, Israel and Palestine are neighbours and long after the international community forgets their problem and moves on to other burning issues, the geography of the two will not change and they would have to learn to co-exist. If Israel's cooperation is needed to achieve the Palestinian statehood, it is time the international community ceases to be judge, jury and executioner but learns to the simple fact: Occupation must end but rockets and tunnels will only perpetuate it.

Indeed, avoiding the over-simplification of the problem should guide Modi's attitude towards the Gaza crisis. Resolving the conflict and stopping bloodshed is more important than passing resolutions and making statements.

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