

Turmoil in West Asia

Challenges for the Region and the World

Event Report

On 20 September 2023, Symbiosis School for International Studies conducted a panel discussion on the topic “Turmoil in West Asia, Challenges for the Region and the World” to grasp the first impressions of what the recent Israel-Palestine conflict, its history, ground reality, and its implication on regional and global politics. After a brief speech by Prof. Shivali Lavale, Director of SSIS welcoming the panelists to the event, the event was officiated. The three panelists were Ambassador (Retd) Talmiz Ahmad, Former Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE, Dr. Alvite Ningthoujam, Assistant Professor at SSIS specializing in Israel Area studies, and Dr. Shafat Yousaf, Assistant Professor of SSIS specializing in Iran Area studies.

Session on Turmoil in West Asia

Panel speech

Dr. Ningthoujam in his opening speech laid down the course of the 3-hour panel discussion primarily divided into two sections the first session would attempt to map the history, ground realities, and present condition with speeches from the panelists followed by intra-panel questioning and then open up the floor to questions from the audience. The second session would delve into the regional and global impacts of the crisis, emphasizing the reactions of countries like the United States, China, and India. In his speech, Dr. Ningthoujam gave an overview of the global importance of the conflict due to its geopolitical significance for Europe, Africa, and Asia and his strong oil politics. This region would also impact the religious and cultural context across the world making it harder for it to be ignored. He provided brewing frustration from ignorance of Palestine and internal political dynamics of the cabinet and illegal settlers and the need for the suffering to be given global recognition as some of the key factors that culminated in the 7th October 2023 crisis in the region. These frustrations were portrayed outwardly by the Hamas group and the current crisis is a pressing matter that has swept over world news and caused a large number of casualties. Negotiation according to him seems a long way away but he believes that a change in leadership on both sides would be able to handle the crisis better.

Dr. Yousuf in his speech presented a discourse between the cultural talk and the political talk associated with the crisis. The war of civilization against barbarism and the notion of a war against evil portrayed by leaders are to be seen as a cultural talk that should be given less importance to students of International Relations discipline. On the other hand, the political talk encompassing the historical background and the present realities needs to be addressed. The question of whether Palestinians should have a state of their own is one that has a moral equivalency that doesn't transform into political equivalency due to the discrepancies in the ground political conditions. On assessing Iran's deterrence capability, Dr. Yousuf said that Iran has a lot at stake to compete against the combined efforts of Israel and the United States. Iran's access to resistance is mainly on the allies through oil politics. Some poignant questions put forward by the

panelist was if Hezbollah were to come into play, would they be able to take responsibility and would they be able to afford losing the present investment from the allies due to these actions?

Mr. Talmiz Ahmad addressed the turmoil in West Asia from a historical, cultural and a religious lens giving account of some of the major historical events. He talks about the two people: Arabs and the Jews who are in a visceral conflict with each other claiming the same space of land that is called Palestine traditionally by the Romans and state of Israel by the Jewish people. He gives a very substantial backstory behind everything that is unveiling today in Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank: the war of 1948, the war of 1967, Zionism and the Oslo Accords. He says that the Jews who were persecuted by the Europeans gradually favored Eretz Israel (Greater Israel) which means that the Jews, particularly the extreme Zionists, proclaimed that the land of Israel is a gift to the unique people chosen by the good Lord and therefore they do not want this territory to be contaminated by anyone who is evil. Thus Mr Ahmad analyzes the issue looking into three dimensions: the Israel-Palestine, the Western world and the Arab world.

Intra-panel Questions

Dr. Ningthoujam began the intra-panel session posing questions to Dr. Yosuf and Mr. Ahmad:

What according to you would be the major takeaway of the present conflict of Hamas? How do you do it in terms of wins and losses?

Dr. Yosuf says that there might not be any difference or nothing new after the whole discussion but the change would be seen if Israel is able to move a team from Northern Gaza to the South to have a safe zone and deterrence. That is the takeaway according to him as he has no concrete answer to the long term solutions to the issue.

How do you see this conflict bringing together the different voices that also exist within the Palestinian society?

An emotional unification can definitely be seen in the region but that translating to a political unification is difficult to see. One important reason is that the stand of Hamas and the stand of El Fatah is quite different in the recognition of the state of Israel: while Hamas has outrightly rejected the recognition, the Palestinian authority has historically done so. Nevertheless, there are questions being raised on the leadership of Palestine which is evident from the recent protests in the West Bank. Perhaps some sort of internal cooperation is required for some sort of substantial results.

How do you see the problem of leadership in the Palestinian authority?

Mr. Ahmad, answering this question says, there has been a problem ever since the division of leadership between El Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. On one hand, there is a unified sect who were mistreated by the Israeli people and on the other hand there is Hamas, an Islamic

group created when the PLO was at its peak sharing its ideological affiliation with Muslim Brotherhood. There is a long discourse taken up by the scholars trying to trace the existence of Hamas but there is now a consensus that Israel had an active role to play in encouraging the rise and development of Hamas as a counter to a secular and popular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This divide has affected majorly three players: the Palestine authority of Mahmoud Abbas, the Israeli government and the Americans who were fighting islam terrorism all over the world. The tensions in the governing entities have created problems.

Audience Questions

The audience directed some fascinating questions to the panelists:

South Africa as an apartheid state had to face consequences such as sanctions and isolation from the international community, Israel as an apartheid state does not seem to face the same consequences so what has changed that?

Until the Cold war, the United States gave total support to the apartheid state due to the fear that the African National Congress would turn pro East. The situation changed once the Cold war ended. The case of Israel, the scenario is very different because the Cold war has not been a material factor and Israel is supported by every aspect of the American establishment whether it is the White House, the Senate, or the media and the finance and the development of the powerful entity of Israel lobby. However, again, the impact of the current war is difficult to predict further US-Israel relationship as Prime Minister Netanyahu over the past five years has succeeded in alienating large sections of American opinion.

Over the years, Hamas has transformed as can be seen in the tactical usage of its missiles and the multidomain attack against Israel. In that sense, how has Hamas adapted to Israeli strategies and what it has done over the years in order to have life-threatening attacks on Israel?

Over the period of years, they have mastered the art of invading some of the security surveillance mechanisms of the Israeli defense forces. One important development is the missile range and once the rockets started to fall on Tel Aviv, the entire dynamic changed because earlier it was not possible posing a real time threat to the citizens. Now the rockets reach Haifa and also beyond it. The Israel intelligence is challenged with how Hamas have been able to come out with such sophisticated systems and what kind of mechanism have they used to breach one of the world's best security systems.

Mr. Ahmad adding to this says that there is some evidence about the Israeli over confidence and underestimation of the enemy including supreme contempt for the enemies.

Session on Implications of the Crisis on Regional and Global Politics

The last session emphasized on the nature of the emerging world order and the role of the different states in respect to this particular conflict. Taking a cue from what the US President, Joe Biden said that this could be an inflection point, there are increasing discussions about this conflict and what kind of the implications it could have on the regional countries as well as the extra regional powers including India.

Towards the end, Dr. Ningthoujam encouraged the students to conduct research on this conflict and understand the important developments in terms of information warfare, misinformation, disinformation, fake information and the role of narratives.

Vote of Thanks

The vote of thanks was delivered by Dr. Anamika Asthana, Assistant Professor at SSIS, wherein she pointed out the significance of the session on behalf of everyone who were better off leaving the room with a heightened sense of awareness of the issue in West Asia.



