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Opinion – The Role of Smart Power and Collective Action in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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MAZLUM ÖZKAN, OCT 18 2024

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with roots going back to the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the establishment of Israel in 1948, remains one of the most enduring and destabilizing geopolitical crises of our time. The violence that erupted on October 7, 2023, following Hamas's attacks and Israel's military response in Gaza and Lebanon, is just the latest manifestation of a conflict that has deep historical roots. The ongoing occupation, forced displacement, and systemic discrimination against Palestinians make lasting peace feel elusive.

However, the conflict cannot be viewed in isolation. It is entangled with broader geopolitical shifts, particularly the waning of unipolarity and the rise of a multipolar global order. As the world transitions from a U.S.-dominated system to one where not only China and Russia, but also regional countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye play major roles, new opportunities—and challenges—arise for regional powers in the Middle East to counterbalance American hegemony and its support for Israel. The world today is one where American dominance is no longer uncontested. This new dynamic is critical when analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as U.S. support for Israel remains unwavering despite changing global alignments. Despite America's pivot toward East Asia to counter China, it is still deeply entrenched in Middle Eastern conflicts—primarily due to its strategic alliance with Israel. This support, which underpins Israel's aggressive policies toward Palestinians, has allowed the continuation of apartheid-like conditions in Gaza and the West Bank.

The escalation following Hamas's October 7 attacks has intensified three overlapping conflicts: the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, Israel's confrontation with Hezbollah, and the standoff between Israel, Iran, and the United States. These conflicts are not only regional but are tied to global power dynamics, with Israel's aggressive military actions supported by the U.S. In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, Israel's bombardment of Gaza has led to immense destruction and the deaths of thousands of civilians. Israel's response goes beyond defeating Hamas—it is a continuation of its long-standing goal of ethnic cleansing in Gaza and the West Bank, aiming to create a homogeneous Jewish state. The destruction and systematic targeting of Palestinian civilians meet the criteria for genocide as defined by the 1948 Genocide Convention, which criminalizes acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The targeting of Palestinians—through killing, inflicting serious harm, and creating conditions calculated to bring about their destruction—fits within the legal framework established under international law. Yet, despite these violations, the U.S. continues to shield Israel from international condemnation.

The ongoing conflict between Israel and Hezbollah adds further complexity to the already volatile regional landscape. Hezbollah's sustained rocket attacks on northern Israel have provoked a fierce Israeli response, characterized by a mix of military operations aimed at decapitating Hezbollah's leadership and punitive strikes that often affect civilian areas. Despite Israel's extensive military campaigns, Hezbollah remains a formidable force, capable of resisting Israeli dominance along the northern front. Complicating matters further is Iran, whose influence over Hezbollah remains central to the group's strategic decisions. Although neither Iran nor the United States actively seek direct confrontation, Israel has been steadily increasing pressure, especially after Iran's missile attack in response to the assassination of key Hezbollah and Hamas leaders. This escalation could be part of Israel's strategy to provoke a broader conflict, possibly drawing the U.S. into action against Iran's nuclear program. With tensions rising, Israel's

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potential retaliatory strikes on strategic Iranian assets, such as nuclear facilities or oil infrastructure, could further destabilize the region. This situation not only heightens the risk of a full-scale regional war but also threatens to involve global powers like Russia and China, significantly raising the stakes for an international crisis.

Given the deeply entrenched nature of U.S. support for Israel, regional powers must develop strategies that effectively counterbalance both American influence and Israeli aggression. The strategic use of smart power, as defined by Joseph Nye, presents a viable approach. Smart power combines the use of hard power—coercive measures such as military or economic pressure—with soft power, which relies on diplomacy, cultural influence, and positive attraction to shape international relations. By employing a combination of these tactics, Muslim-majority nations in the region can challenge American hegemony while advancing their collective interests.

One of the most effective strategies for these regional powers could involve leveraging their economic resources, particularly control over global energy supplies. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE hold significant sway over oil and gas production, providing them with the ability to impose economic pressure. A coordinated effort to restrict exports or impose an oil embargo on the U.S. or U.S.-aligned nations could cause severe disruption to the global economy, potentially forcing Washington to reconsider its uncritical support for Israel. This approach exemplifies the smart power strategy by combining economic hard power with the diplomatic leverage necessary to sway public opinion and gain international support for their cause.

The 1973 Oil Crisis, when Arab nations imposed an oil embargo on the West in retaliation for its support of Israel during the Yom Kippur War, serves as a powerful historical example of how collective economic action can significantly shift U.S. policy in the region. The embargo led to skyrocketing oil prices and forced the U.S. to reassess its energy dependence, ultimately influencing American diplomatic efforts, such as the Camp David Accords. While implementing such measures today would carry considerable risks for Gulf economies, the leverage it could generate remains substantial. Gulf states could also explore other economic strategies, such as divesting from U.S. financial markets or reducing investments in American defense companies that supply weapons to Israel. Such coordinated actions would echo the impact of the 1973 crisis, potentially forcing Washington to reconsider its unwavering support for Israel.

Diplomatically, regional powers must strengthen their alliances to present a unified front in countering Israeli policies. This effort requires overcoming long-standing sectarian divides, particularly the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has historically undermined collective action. However, the recent rapprochement between these two regional powers offers a unique opportunity for greater collaboration. If key players like Türkiye, Pakistan, Egypt, and other Gulf states can be integrated into this diplomatic alliance, the resulting bloc could wield significant influence on the global stage. By jointly advocating for Palestinian sovereignty at international forums such as the United Nations, this coalition could reshape the international discourse on Israel and Palestine. A common threat could serve as a unifying force for these nations. Their historical and religious ties are strong, and it is crucial for them to recognize the importance of setting aside internal conflicts to create a united front. Otherwise, as Israel continues its actions in the region, unchecked by fragmented opposition, it will remain free to impose its will, much like the post-World War I and II divisions enabled.

Achieving this level of coordination is not without its challenges. The Arab League, founded in 1945 as a loose confederation of Arab states, has long struggled with internal divisions and conflicting priorities. Its structural limitations, such as the inability to compel member states to follow collective resolutions, have often prevented unified action on critical issues like Palestine. Rivalries between member states, shifting geopolitical alliances, and sectarian divides—particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran—have further complicated efforts at cooperation. For instance, despite the Arab League's historical emphasis on the Palestinian cause, the recent normalization of relations between several Gulf states and Israel, such as under the Abraham Accords, has further weakened the league's unified stance on Palestine. By amplifying the Palestine narrative and shaping global opinion—critical elements of Joseph Nye's smart power framework—the Arab League can still influence international discourse. Recent protests in Europe, for example, demonstrate a growing global sympathy for Palestinians, suggesting that Israel and the Netanyahu government may be losing the battle for public appeal. Even though the Arab League has often failed to act cohesively, overcoming internal differences could enhance its ability to counter Israeli policies on the world stage.

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A united Middle East, bolstered by strong ties to other emerging global powers, could advocate for reforms at the United Nations, particularly challenging the veto power the U.S. frequently uses to shield Israel from international accountability. Beyond diplomacy, military deterrence would be a crucial element of any unified regional strategy. With formidable military capabilities, both Iran and Türkiye could act as significant deterrents against Israeli aggression. While direct military confrontation with Israel poses considerable risks, the creation of a collective defense pact—similar to NATO—among Muslim-majority nations could effectively counterbalance Israel's military dominance. Such a defense alliance would not only safeguard Palestinian sovereignty but also act as a deterrent to further Israeli military expansion into Lebanon, Syria, or other regions. This pact could involve joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and the development of advanced military technologies, such as integrated air defense systems capable of countering Israeli airstrikes. Additionally, the threat of coordinated missile capabilities from Iran and Türkiye could serve as a substantial deterrent to further Israeli incursions.

One of the key factors enabling the U.S. to support Israel is its extensive military presence in the Middle East, with bases like Al Udeid in Qatar, Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, and Naval Support Activity Bahrain acting as strategic hubs for American and Israeli interests. Restricting U.S. access to these bases—or significantly reducing its military footprint—would severely undermine Washington's ability to provide robust military support for Israeli operations in the region.

Overall, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a focal point of instability in the Middle East, but it is also emblematic of the broader power dynamics in an evolving international system. While U.S. hegemony continues to shield Israel from accountability, the rise of a multipolar world presents fresh opportunities for regional powers to challenge this dominance. Through a strategic mix of economic pressure, diplomatic alliances, and military deterrence, Muslim-majority nations have the potential to recalibrate both U.S. and Israeli policies. Yet, the success of this approach depends on overcoming internal divisions and fostering genuine, sustained cooperation among regional actors. While the obstacles are significant, the potential rewards—advancing Palestinian sovereignty and achieving broader regional stability—could reshape the Middle East in a transformative way.

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