

*LKI Foreign Policy Forum II*

**Israel-Palestine Conflict and Its Ramifications: Global Perspectives**



The second LKI Foreign Policy Forum titled ‘Israel-Palestine Conflict and Its Ramifications: Global Perspectives’ was held on Wednesday 15th November 2023 at the Lighthouse Auditorium of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. Held on a quarterly basis, LKI’s Foreign Policy Forum brings together experts with diverse perspectives to discuss contemporary foreign policy issues and their implications for Sri Lanka and the region. The most recent forum provided a platform to discuss perspectives on the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict centered on the current developments in Gaza, and its implications for the region and the world. The forum facilitated a panel discussion and question-and-answer session with a representative gathering of heads of diplomatic missions, government officials, academics, civil society, media practitioners, and students.

Introducing the subject, Amb. Ravinatha Aryasinha, Executive Director of LKI, who hosted the session, provided context to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. He described the timeline of recent hostilities since the attack by the Hamas on October 7<sup>th</sup> and taking of hostages, and the retaliatory action taken by the Israeli security forces that has continued since. Enumerating the numbers killed, injured, and the resulting displacement due to the conflict, he pointed out that despite several appeals by the UN Secretary General and humanitarian organisations on the ground, even a cessation of hostilities had not been forthcoming. Five weeks into the conflict, he also drew attention to the failure of the UN Security Council to act, the inability of the Human Rights Council to call a Special Session on the issue, and how the recent vote in the UN General Assembly exposed the double standards in the application of universal humanitarian

and human rights norms. He further emphasised that this has deep seeded implications for the assessment of past, ongoing and future conflicts.

Opening the discussion, Hon. Tharaka Balasuriya MP, State Minister of Foreign Affairs, shared both the perspectives of the Government of Sri Lanka and the people of Sri Lanka. He outlined that the government condemns the attacks by Hamas on October 7th and recognises the right for Israel to defend itself. However, the government also recognises the disproportionality of the Israeli response to these attacks and supported the calls for a ceasefire in the region to protect the people of Israel and Palestinian Territories. He emphasised the need for international organisations to address the root causes of the problems in the region, while also drawing attention to the absence of a ‘rules-based order’. Hon. State Minister further highlighted the position amongst elected officials in Sri Lanka, stating that 157 MPs recently signed a letter to the UN in support of Palestine. At the public level, he described the overwhelming support for Palestine amongst the Sri Lankan people, and the Global South more generally, and questioned the intentions of western states who have prolonged the conflict for selfish reasons.

Participating in the discussion, the Head of Delegation for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Sri Lanka Ms. Severine Chappaz, provided the humanitarian context in Gaza and described the challenges faced by organisations on the ground as they support civilians affected by the conflict. She emphasised that international humanitarian law is the most complete and practical tool to ensure the protection of civilians and that it must be upheld to pave the way for the de-escalation of the conflict. Ms. Chappaz reiterated the ICRC position which calls for the protection of civilians and essential infrastructure, including water security and medical services, the immediate release of hostages, and the free movement of civilians out of the conflict zones.

South African High Commissioner to Sri Lanka H.E. Sandile Edwin Schalk, expressed his deep concern regarding the failure of multilateral organisations to uphold international humanitarian law. He continued; ‘Apartheid was a system that normalised criminal behaviour, and criminalised normal behaviour’, in reference to his own country’s experience of Apartheid, and drew parallels to the systematic oppression of Palestinians in Gaza. Describing Israel’s illegal occupation of Gaza and the unjustifiable war crimes committed by Israel, he asked “does any occupying force, have a right to defend?” Emphasizing the importance of an immediate ceasefire, High Commissioner Schalk was also critical of “those who won’t vote in support of a ceasefire and humanitarian corridors”. The High Commissioner also emphasised the flaws in the United Nations architecture, which has failed to adapt to the changing global demographics and over-represents the historically influential states by whom it was created. He outlined the failure of multilateral organisations to uphold international humanitarian law due to power politics and skewed power structures, which the Global South has begun to disrupt through more pragmatic and cohesive approaches to international relations. The High Commissioner also acknowledged the formation of alliances based on military might, which presents new challenges to the global order and has dangerous implications for global security. He said the Global South has an important responsibility to contain and curtail these tendencies.

The panel discussion was enhanced by insightful contributions from experts in the audience, including Former Foreign Secretary Amb. H. M. G. S. Palihakkara, Former Air Chief Marshal Gagan Bulathsinghala, Executive Director of the IINSS Col. Nalin Herath, the Deputy Head of Delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka, Mr. Lars Bredal, Former Executive Director LKI Dr. D. L. Mendis, Foreign Policy Analyst Uditha Devapriya, as well as several recent graduates and undergraduates from the IR Programmes of the University of Colombo and the Kotalawela Defence University (KDU). They covered topics including the inaction of the international community in protecting civilians, the importance of a humanitarian pause, the double standards applied in the applications of accountability at the UN Human Rights Council, the strength of the Global South in multilateral organisations, and the evolving role of Non-State Actors in conflict settings. The panelists engaged further with the audience to enrich the discussion and encouraged participants to engage with global perspectives on pressing contemporary issues to get a more holistic understanding of the conflict and other regional issues.

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