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Gaza War Update- Israel-Lebanon Ceasefire Takes Hold; ICC Issues Arrest Warrant against Netanyahu

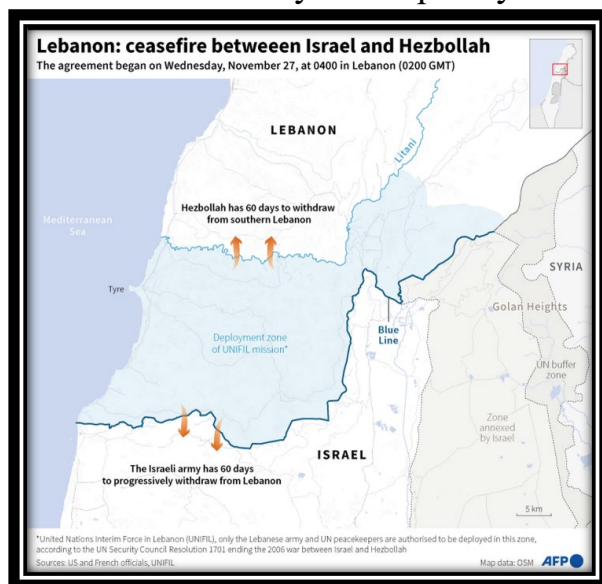
The Sectarian Violence in Kurram District in Pakistan

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In the midst of Israel's ongoing wars against Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria and direct confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant was dismissed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 5 November. Netanyahu stated that trust between the two leaders had "cracked". Foreign Minister Israel Katz replaced Gallant while Gideon Sa'ar, who was a Minister without Portfolio in the National Unity government formed in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks, was named the Foreign Minister.

Gallant stated in an interview that the reasons for his dismissal included differences with the prime minister over the issue of ultra-orthodox military service, the issue of hostages still in the custody of Hamas and the need for an enquiry over the military failures that led to the Hamas attacks. Gallant opposed the law being finalised by the Netanyahu government granting continued exemptions from military service for ultra-orthodox Jews. This was after an Israeli court had ruled in June 2024 that the exemptions were illegal. 9 November marked the 400 days of captivity of hostages. The political opposition and the



families of hostages critiqued the move to dismiss Gallant as Katz did not have sufficient security-related experience. Gallant had served in the Israeli Navy and later headed the Israel Defence Force (IDF) Southern Command during the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2008-09 war with Hamas in Gaza.

On the Lebanon front, a ceasefire agreement between the IDF and the Hezbollah brokered by the US and France took effect on 28 November. The IDF is required not to undertake military operations against civilians

inside Lebanon while the Lebanese government is required to prevent Hezbollah or any other militant organisation from conducting military operations against Israel. The IDF is required to withdraw south of the de-facto border within two months, with Lebanese troops dismantling any Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Lebanon.

The IDF insisted that the Israeli Air Force (IsAF) remained ready to act across Lebanese territory and reiterated that the IDF Aerial Defense Array was in a high state of readiness to counter any rocket and/or missile barrages. While the IDF and Hezbollah had ramped up their conflict in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks, the IDF upped the ante in September with a series of pager attacks and targeted killings of Hezbollah senior leadership, including Hassan Nasrallah.

The International Criminal Court on 21 November, meanwhile, issued arrest warrants against Netanyahu, former Defence Minister Gallant and Hamas leader Mohammed Deif for crimes against humanity and war crimes allegedly committed during the Israel-Hamas war. Deif was killed in an Israeli air strike in July 2024. Netanyahu condemned the ICC's decision as "antisemitic", and the Israeli government challenged the legitimacy as well as the jurisdiction of the arrest warrants. The ICC in 2021 had ruled that it had jurisdiction over the Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Some European countries such as Italy and the Netherlands have said they will arrest both men if they set foot on their territory. US President Joe Biden condemned the ICC decision as "outrageous" and asserted that there was "no equivalence — none — between Israel and Hamas".

In other developments, the chief of the US CENTCOM Gen Erik Kurilla visited Israel on 31 October as well as on 24 November. While Gen Kurilla had a situational assessment focussed on security and strategic issues with an emphasis on Lebanon on 24 November, he visited a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile battery during his 31 October visit. Gen Luciano Portolano, the Chief of the Italian Defence General Staff, also visited Israel on 30 October. The discussions during his visit focussed on operational events against Hezbollah, and the requirement of safeguarding the security of UN personnel deployed in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission, who were operating under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701.

As regards Gaza, the IDF military operations were continuing even as it expanded the humanitarian area and opened a new border crossing as part of efforts to increase the volume and routes of aid to Gaza. The IDF on 27 November noted that since the start of the war, it had facilitated the entry of over 50,000 trucks carrying food, water, medical aid, and shelter equipment along with the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT).

The Sectarian Violence in Kurram District in Pakistan

Pakistani society, at present, appears to be highly polarised and deeply divided from within. It was imagined by its forefathers as a homeland to the Muslim populace of the Indian subcontinent where they would pursue their civilisational destiny without any fear and domination by what many referred to as the Hindu majority of India. It did not take long for many thinking individuals within the country to realise that their co-religionists



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belonging to various sects and sub-sects of Islam would fight each other as the worst enemies.

Pakistan, over the last several decades, has somewhat internalised sectarian violence in the society due to the policies and practices of its politico-security elites. Large-scale sectarian violence often resulting in killings of dozens of people no longer shakes the inner conscience of the people at the helm both in the federal capital of Islamabad as well as the provincial capitals in Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, and Peshawar. It has become a new norm where political leaders issue statements condemning the incidents and appeal to various groups involved in it to shun the violence. Law enforcement agencies, on their part, become active and keep a strict vigil for some time. However, once the situation comes under control and normalises, everyone forgets about it till the next round of killings starts. The Kurram district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is witness to innumerable incidents of sectarian killings with no solution appearing to be in sight.

The fresh round of sectarian violence started in September 2024 when two tribes belonging to different sects of Islam engaged each other in armed clashes that resulted in 46 deaths and many other injuries. Following this, the district administration requested a local Jirga (Tribal assembly of elders) to hold talks with the warring groups with an aim to bring peace to the area. As the Jirga was continuing with its efforts to normalise the situation, On October 12, 2024, Maqbal tribesmen dealt a severe blow to the peace efforts by opening fire on the rival tribes injuring two people. Soon, the clashes engulfed other parts of the district resulting in 15 deaths including two women and a child and leaving others injured.

In retaliation, on November 21, a convoy of about 200 vehicles, on its way from Parachinar to Peshawar, came under heavy gunfire in the Mandori Charkhel area in Lower Kurram which resulted in the killings of 39 people including seven women and a minor girl, whereas as at least 28 got injured. This was followed by an overnight reprisal, arson attack and gunfights on November 23, which led to the killing of 21 people and injuring another 30. As per the reports in prominent media houses in Pakistan, a bunch of armed men from Parachinar entered the Bagan Bazar and surrounding villages following which a carnage took place. More than 130 people have died and 186 injured so far, but there appears to be no respite in violence.

These attacks were strongly condemned and criticised by political as well as religious leaders in Pakistan. Majlis Wahdat-i-Muslimeen (MWM), a political organisation belonging to the Shiite sect, declared a three-day mourning period and announced protests throughout the country. Its General Secretary Syed Nasir Abbas Shirazi questioned the 'criminal silence' of the interior minister and accused the rulers of running the country at the cost of their blood.

This is not the first time that Kurram has witnessed large-scale sectarian violence. The region has a history of sectarian violence which goes back to several decades. Those at the helm in Islamabad and Peshawar often brushed the incidents of

violence in Kurram as inter-tribe clashes having their origins in certain protracted land disputes. Even today, the federal and provincial governments largely see Kurram violence as a by-product of protracted land disputes between the tribes. There is no denying the fact that the rival Islamic sects also have decades-old land disputes, however, that is neither the sole nor the primary reason for violence.

Unlike other neighbouring districts, inhabitants in Kurram form a unique sectarian demography. Contrary to other neighbouring districts, tribal communities in Kurram—Bangash, Mangal, Masuzai, Muqbal, Parachamkani, and Turi—have a significant following of the Shiite sect of Islam. It is not a coincidence that adherents of Shiite sects in Kurram have historically opposed the Sunnite Taliban and Arabs and refused to provide shelter to Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban fleeing Tora Bora mountains when the US launched the War on Terror in the region. This did not go well with those who wanted to pursue the policy of ‘running with hares and hunting with the hounds.

If the concerned quarters in Pakistan continuously refuse to acknowledge the real nature of the problem, they will only be pushing the region toward the brink sooner rather than later.

The Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Defence Ministers' Meeting

The 2024 Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Defense Ministers' Meeting (TDMM) held in Darwin Australia, in its 14th iteration, underscores a significant deepening of strategic cooperation among the three nations with a shared aim of collective deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. The joint statement highlighted three key themes viz. Collective deterrence and regional security; technological collaboration and defence industrial cooperation; expanding trilateral operational cooperation.



The statement reaffirms the unwavering commitment of the three nations to a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region to be achieved by building up collective deterrence to ensure the continuation of a rules-based international order, where sovereignty is respected, and disputes are resolved peacefully. This involves the pooling of military and diplomatic resources to deter potential adversaries. The trilateral discussion expressed serious concern over China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the East and South China Seas, including its maritime claims and coercive tactics. The cross-strait crisis was clearly on the agenda as Australia's Deputy Prime Minister, Richard Marles, announced that Japanese troops would begin regular deployments in northern Australia as part of military cooperation between the

three countries. The annual deployment of 2,000 US troops to northern Australia as part of the Marine Rotational Force Darwin (MRF-D), a 2011 agreement, is a significant component of this partnership. The addition of Japan in exercises with the MRF-D during its next rotation is noteworthy.

The TDMM statement also highlighted the importance of technological collaboration and defence industrial cooperation among three partners. The three nations are committed to working together on advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and hypersonic weapons. The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR) is a key platform for promoting defence industrial cooperation and supply chain resilience. Additionally, joint investments in technology like next-generation military drones, long-range missiles, and missile defence systems bolster their combined military capabilities. The statement reflects this understanding and emphasizes the need to strengthen regional air and missile defence capabilities. The trilateral live-fire exercise at Exercise Talisman Sabre 2027 will be a significant milestone in this regard.

The TDMM outlines a range of initiatives to enhance trilateral operational cooperation. These include:

- **Trilateral Defense Consultations:** Regular consultations to align policy and operational objectives and plans for reciprocal deployments of fighter and transport aircraft among the three countries.
- **Expanded Participation in Joint Exercises:** Increased participation in exercises such as Talisman Sabre, Southern Jackaroo, and Keen Sword and expanded trilateral cooperation by including Australia in key Japan-US exercises like ORIENT SHIELD from 2025.
- **Intelligence Sharing:** Plans to prioritize trilateral intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. This includes Australian personnel participating in the Japan-US Bilateral Information Analysis Cell (BIAC), with plans to further increase Australian contributions.
- **Maritime Domain Awareness:** Closer cooperation on maritime domain awareness, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite the potential of the trilateral partnership, regional experts have pointed out that challenges remain to be addressed. They highlight that differing national priorities, domestic political considerations, and varying defence budgets could hinder the effectiveness of the trilateral approach. Additionally, convincing other regional actors to participate actively in collective deterrence could be difficult. However, the 2024 TDMM Joint Statement signals a significant escalation in trilateral cooperation among Australia, Japan, and the United States. This deepening partnership has far-reaching implications for the Indo-Pacific region in terms of signalling collective deterrence of China, building on enhanced interoperability and maintaining technological leadership to strengthen regional security.