

STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

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Biosphere reserves are evolving as pockets of hope

A way from the cacophony of urban life, most of us look for respite in sites with natural beauty, lush greenery, and peaceful surroundings. As the tourist season approaches, it is no surprise that while we search for unpolluted spots to explore, unconsciously our consumption of single-use plastic, in particular plastic water bottles, will also significantly increase. With 80% of all tourism taking place in coastal areas, would you call it a relaxing vacation if you found discarded plastic bottles while taking a stroll on the beach?

In the Island of Principe Biosphere Reserve, Sao Tome and Principe in Africa, schoolchildren have been equipped with stainless steel bottles for drinking water, so the daily production and consumption of single-use plastic bottles can be completely avoided. Acting as pockets of hope in the face of the climate crisis, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) biosphere reserves are hidden oases, protecting biodiversity, reducing pollution, and enhancing climate resilience. They are living jewels of land, coastal and marine ecosystems, scattered across the globe, where nature and humans come together creating a symphony of life.

In aid of conservation

World Biosphere Reserve Day is celebrated on November 3 each year to raise awareness of the importance of biosphere reserves and to promote their conservation and sustainable use. In the heart of each biosphere reserve lies the strictly protected core zone, providing habitat for flora and fauna, and protecting water, soil, air, and biota as a whole ecosystem. There is a buffer zone surrounding the core zone, where people live and work in harmony with nature; a zone that also functions as a laboratory for scientists to study nature, and for training and education. The outermost edge is the transition zone where communities practise socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable human activities.

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On the second anniversary of World Biosphere Reserve Day, November 3, it is important to reflect on the progress made in conserving and sustainably using these vital ecosystems

Designated by UNESCO to promote the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable development, and research, biosphere reserves are also supported by other United Nations agencies, for example the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, as well as the International Union for Conservation of Nature. According to UNESCO, there are currently 748 biosphere reserves across 134 countries, including 22 transboundary sites, enhancing the friendly cooperation between neighbouring countries. They impact the lives of more than 250 million people in 134 countries; 12 sites can be found in India alone.

Biosphere reserves are vital for the future of our planet. They are a living testament to the resilience of nature, that even amidst human activity, finds a way to flourish. They are home to a wide variety of ecosystems – from tropical rainforests to alpine deserts, and thereby provide home to countless unique and endangered plants and animals species. In addition to playing a vital role in the protection of biodiversity and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources, they also provide opportunities for sustainable economic development. In recent years, biosphere reserves have become crucial in our fight against climate change, as these areas are home to many of the world's carbon sinks helping to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Carbon sinks, like forests and the ocean, provide solutions in implementing adaptation strategies to fight climate change.

At the local level

There have been significant advancements in the conservation of biosphere reserves on the local level. For example, in the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve in India, local communities are working together to manage mangrove forests and protect the biodiversity of the region. In the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve in India, local communities, including women, are contributing

towards conservation efforts by forming self-help groups, while the youth are getting engaged in eco-tourism.

Recently recognised with the UNESCO Michel Batisse Award for Biosphere Reserve Management 2023, the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve Trust has also introduced the concept of 'plastic checkpoints'. Community members check all vehicles and tourists for plastic waste, which is collected, recycled and used for the construction of roads. In times of global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and sustainable development, the role of biosphere reserves becomes even more important. Despite these sites being the most vital ecosystems protecting nature, these oases are not without threats such as deforestation, invasive species and land use changes such as mining. With increasing urbanisation and constant growth of the world population, exploitation by humans is ever increasing.

The Asian meet in Chennai

On this second anniversary of World Biosphere Reserve Day, it is important to reflect on the progress that has been made in conserving and sustainably using these vital ecosystems. In this context, UNESCO in partnership with the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, concluded the 10th South and Central Asian Biosphere Reserve Network Meeting (SACAM) in Chennai, India (November 1-3). With the theme "Ridge to Reef," the SACAM provided a platform for exchanging knowledge and fostering collaborations in the realm of sustainable environmental practices in the South and Central Asia Region.

The UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme enhances the human-environment relationship through combining natural and social sciences to improve livelihoods, safeguard ecosystems, and promote sustainable economic development.

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The revenge of old West Asia

There was no such thing as Palestinians," Golda Meir, the then Labour Prime Minister of Israel, told The Sunday Times on June 15, 1969, on the second anniversary of the Six-Day War. It was during the 1967 war, Israel brought the whole of historical Palestine under its control. In the 1948-49 first Arab-Israeli war, Israel had captured 23% more territories, including West Jerusalem, than what the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine had proposed.

In 1967, it seized the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Ever since, Palestinian territories have remained under Israel's military occupation and control (it pulled back both troops and Jewish settlers from Gaza in 2005 after the second intifada, but has laid siege to the enclave since 2007).

The Israeli narrative

After Hamas's brutal October 7 Sabbath attack on Israel, killing at least 1,400 people, mostly civilians, Israel has launched a devastating bombing campaign on Gaza, leaving over 9,000 Palestinians dead in 27 days, most of them women and children. Israel's narrative is that it has the right to respond to Hamas's terror attack. And the use of disproportionate force against the enemy, deliberately targeting civilians, is a well-known Israeli method (the Dahiya doctrine). General Gadi Eisenkot, a former Israeli Chief of General Staff, once said about the Israel Defense Forces' bombing of Dahiya, Lebanon, "We will apply disproportionate force on it and cause great damage and destruction there. From our standpoint, these are not civilian villages, they are military bases." Israel's current President Isaac Herzog echoed Gen. Eisenkot (now a Minister), when he said on October 14 (after Israel ordered over a million people in northern Gaza to evacuate), that there are no innocent civilians in Gaza. "It's an entire nation out there that's responsible," Mr. Herzog said in a press conference.

Between what Golda Meir and Mr. Herzog said lies the reality of the Palestinians – either they do not exist as a national category, or they are all culprits and punishable. Israel says its heavy response is necessitated by its circumstances. Its narrative is that it is living in a hostile regional environment faced with Islamist terrorism. There is a history of wars with the Arab world. Hamas is a Palestinian terrorist organisation with which political dialogue is impossible. Hamas and Hezbollah are directly supported by a Holocaust-denying Iran. So, this argument goes,



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Israel has to stay tough for its own survival. And being tough means continuing the occupation of the Palestinian territories endlessly and responding with massive force and collective punishment to violence by Palestinians.

Let us look at these arguments one by one. Hamas, "the key impediment to peace", was created only in 1988, 21 years after Israel started the direct military occupation of the Palestinian territories. In the 1970s and the early 1980s, the Islamic Centre, a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot and a precursor to Hamas, had Israel's recognition as a charity which allowed the group to raise funds for their activities. Israel then saw Fatah, Yasser Arafat's secular nationalist guerrilla movement, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the coalition Arafat had built, as its main rivals. The PLO had used violence against Israelis, and Israel launched two wars (1978 and 1982) in Lebanon to fight the PLO (the late Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin once called them "murderous anti-Semites"). But during the Oslo talks, the PLO, which for long denied Israel's right to exist and advocated for the liberation of the whole of Palestine ("from the river to the sea"), made a major compromise. Arafat recognised the state of Israel and accepted the formation of an independent Palestine state within the 1967 borders, which is just 22% of historical Palestine.

It was the collapse of Oslo in the subsequent years and continuing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories that led to the strengthening of Hamas, which had always opposed Oslo. By the time the second intifada broke out in 2000, Hamas was already in the driving seat and the PLO's non-violent campaign for statehood was seen as toothless by most Palestinians. So, from a historical perspective, it is not the Palestinian radicalism that prevented peace. Rather, it is the absence of peace and the continuing occupation that strengthened Islamist radicalism in Palestine.

The Iran factor

Second, it is a fact that Iran remains a major rival of Israel in West Asia. Iran also backs Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which jointly carried out the October 7 attack. Thus, the crisis has a clear geopolitical angle. But is Iran the central factor of the Israel-Palestine crisis? Iran became a hostile nation to Israel only in 1979, after the Islamic revolution. Before the revolution, the Iranian monarchy was so close to Israel that both nations had agreed in 1977 to build a military co-production complex inside Iran to make ballistic missiles. Even after the Mullahs seized power in Tehran, Israel supplied

the Islamic revolutionary regime in the 1980s with weapons, under United States supervision, during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Iran did not have much of an influence among the Palestinians during the Oslo process. It was after Oslo collapsed and Hamas began rising as a key pillar of the Palestinian resistance that the Islamic Republic became a major player through its support for Palestinian non-state militias. What Iran did was to exploit the continuing occupation and lack of peace for its geopolitical benefits by supporting radical Palestinian Islamists.

Hostile neighbourhood

Lastly, defenders of Israel's disproportionate aggression always argue that Israel's existence is at stake in a hostile neighbourhood. True, neighbouring Arab countries attacked Israel immediately after the new state was declared in May 1948 within historical Palestine. After that, it was Israel which launched the 1956 and 1967 wars. The last time an Arab country attacked Israeli troops was in 1973 when Egypt, along with Syria, launched the Yom Kippur war. Since then, six Arab countries have normalised ties with Israel, namely Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. And it is hardly a secret that Saudi Arabia and Israel have very good backroom ties though they have not officially established diplomatic relations. Israel is now an undeclared nuclear power with massive air power, ballistic missiles and other weapons. It is also unconditionally supported, militarily, politically and financially, by the U.S., the world's most powerful country. Israel is no longer the David; it is the Goliath of West Asia.

But Israel's regional hegemony and deterrence against and friendship with Arab countries have not brought peace for Israelis. Why? Because the Palestine question remains unaddressed. Palestine may no longer be an Arab-Israeli problem, but it continues to remain an Israel-Palestine problem. Ever since its forced withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Israel's approach has been to ignore the question of occupation, as Golda Meir articulated in 1969: treat Palestinians as a security nuisance and move on with Arab peace plans, shaping "the new Middle East", with the blessings of Washington. But Hamas's brutal October 7 attacks, the first invasion into Israel proper since 1948, shattered the foundations of the "new Middle East". Hamas's indiscriminate attacks and Israel's collective punishment of Gazans suggest that the Palestine question remains the source of all maladies in the region. It is the revenge of old West Asia.

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