

## **The Problems of the “Gaza Crisis” as Seen from the Middle East**

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On December 10-11, I had an opportunity to participate in Doha Forum 2023 held in Qatar. This was the 21st Doha Forum. The large-scale international conference has been hosted by the Qatari government to discuss important international topics such as international politics and security issues, with many high-level speakers invited from Qatar and other countries. At the opening ceremony on the first day of the conference, Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres gave speeches, with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in attendance. The forum was thus attended by distinguished figures including Qatari and foreign leaders and minister-level officials.

Under the title of "Building Shared Futures," this year's Doha Forum focused on the most urgent and important issues for the international community, such as the deepening division of the world and intensifying international competition, as well as the tense geopolitical situation and the significantly deteriorating humanitarian crisis amid the Ukraine and Gaza crises. At the meeting, discussions were held on a wide range of topics, including responses to climate change, energy security, and issues related to innovation and advanced technologies. Climate change attracted attention at a time when the 28th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was going on in Dubai, near Qatar. In my view, however, the most important issues at the conference were the ongoing Gaza crisis in the Middle East and its impacts on the division of the world and competition between nations. The importance of these issues was evident in the setting of the agenda at the forum as they were intensively discussed in the first half of the first day of the conference and were repeatedly taken up in later important sessions. Furthermore, the enthusiastic responses of many participants and audience members to these discussions undoubtedly indicated that the most important matters at this forum were issues related to the Gaza crisis.

Two months have already passed since the current Gaza crisis began with a large-scale surprise attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7. Although there was a brief pause in hostilities, no exit or solution has come into sight in regard to fighting and the hostage crisis. In the initial phase of the Gaza crisis, the world's attention focused on damage in Israel, where the surprise attack caused a large number of human casualties and hostage captivity. As time passed, however, Israel's violent attacks on the Gaza Strip dramatically boosted the Gaza death toll and deteriorated the humanitarian crisis, leading the world to pay attention to the unprecedentedly enormous damage in Gaza.

Immediately after the outbreak of the crisis, there was a period of heightened global interest in the impact of the crisis on the international energy market, such as a temporary surge in crude oil prices. Since then, however, oil market participants have increasingly perceived that even if the Gaza crisis itself becomes more serious, it will exert little impact on oil supply in the Middle East. The Gaza crisis is no longer any main factor that drives crude oil prices. Supply and demand fundamentals and the policy of OPEC-plus oil-producing countries replaced the Gaza crisis as the main driver of the oil

market. In this regard, my own interest has shifted from the Gaza crisis to supply and demand fundamentals and the OPEC-plus group.

Although there have been continuous media reports in Japan on the escalation of the Gaza crisis, public interest in the Gaza crisis has declined relatively in Japan. While the crisis remains an important issue, indications are that attention to the crisis as a significant, serious issue has calmed down.

However, this forum led me to realize that interest in this issue in the Middle East is quite different from that in Japan. This is largely due to the fact that people in the Middle East are witnessing the enormous human toll in Gaza, as evidenced by the rising number of deaths. More than 17,000 people have already been reported to have died in Gaza, including many women and children. Regardless of Israel's claim that its attacks are intended to destroy Hamas, which launched the terrorist attack on Israel, it seems to me that citizens in the Middle East have been emotionally and deeply hurt by and frustrated and angry at the increase in innocent civilian casualties in Gaza.

It was frequently pointed out at the forum that Israeli airstrikes and ground military attacks have rapidly boosted the number of civilian casualties, destroyed life infrastructure such as homes, and cut off energy supplies, unprecedentedly deteriorating the humanitarian crisis in all aspects including food, medical care, and sanitation. Some of the Forum participants used extremely harsh words to criticize Israeli actions, calling for an immediate halt to indiscriminate attacks on civilians. In Qatar, I was reminded of how serious the ongoing humanitarian crisis is.

Attracting my attention was the possibility that criticism and anger over Israel's military attacks that have caused massive casualties will spread and intensify as an international issue. On December 8, the U.N. Security Council took up a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza at the request of U.N. Secretary-General Guterres. While Japan and 12 other countries among the 15 Security Council members voted for the resolution, it failed to be adopted due to a veto by the United States as one of the five permanent members, with the United Kingdom abstaining. This matter was frequently raised at the forum, with harsh opinions expressed against the United States' unwillingness to stop Israel's actions and the United Nations' inability to stop them. If the human toll and humanitarian crisis in Gaza worsen further, opposition to Israel and discontent with the United States may grow in the Middle East, further destabilizing the Middle East and reducing U.S. influence.

Before the outbreak of the Gaza crisis, the biggest challenge in the global geopolitical situation was how to deal with the Ukraine crisis related closely to the deepening of the world's division. However, the situation seems to be changing by the minute. While the Ukraine crisis itself remains a sobering reality, its protraction has led to signs of Western fatigue in supporting Ukraine. The escalation of the Gaza crisis has occurred under such circumstances, requiring the United States and other Western countries to focus on this emerging issue as well as the Ukraine crisis or disperse their power. In addition, the escalation of the Gaza crisis may lead Middle Eastern and other Global South countries to grow more critical of the United States and other Western countries. The dispersion of Western power and the growing criticism against the United States and other Western countries under the escalation of the Gaza crisis could give China and Russia an advantage regarding the geopolitical balance of power.

It was also very impressive that speakers from China and Russia participated in this forum, and expressed their opinions on the state of the international order, the situation in the Middle East, and the Gaza crisis. There is no doubt that the United States' relationship with the Gaza crisis and the

Middle East's response to the relationship, as described above, are matters of grave concern to China and Russia.

The forum in Qatar gave me a valuable opportunity to directly experience first-hand feelings in the Middle East about the issues related to the Gaza crisis. In this regard, it is necessary to be aware that Japanese and Western media reports alone could cause international differences and gaps in the understanding of what is actually happening in the world. In formulating and implementing an international strategy to pursue Japan's national interests, it is indispensable for Japan to try to collect and analyze accurate and timely information from various angles.

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